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Rare bird's fate tied to drilling

Battle: As biologists rush to save the greater sage grouse, energy companies fear restrictions could derail a booming industry.

By Julie Cart

SPOTTED HORSE, Wyo. -- Once again an imperiled bird has become a symbol of clashing values in the Western wilds. Reminiscent of the bitter struggle over the spotted owl, a battle over the greater sage grouse is pitting an industry against protectors of an ancient and colorful species that inhabits the same region believed to harbor much of the West's most promising natural gas deposits.

Biologists warn that the birds, inhabitants of Western prairies for thousands of years, could be extinct in 50 years, although lobbyists for the oil and gas industry contend that protection of the sage grouse under the Endangered Species Act would deal a severe setback to the Bush administration's energy policy.

Wyoming's Gov. Dave Freudenthal entered the fray on behalf of the bird last week, expressing concern about further destruction of sage grouse habitat and calling for a halt, at least for a year, to new drilling around Pinedale, one of two areas in Wyoming where exploration and production have been most intense.

Freudenthal said issuing new leases would be "contrary to the goal of deliberate and responsible development."

Freudenthal is the second Western governor after Bill Richardson of New Mexico to take issue with the rapid expansion of oil and gas drilling. The governors, both Democrats, are echoing regional concerns that the administration's energy policy is jeopardizing other natural resources, including water and wildlife.

Experts estimated there were 2 million sage grouse scattered across the plains of Montana, Wyoming, Idaho, Colorado, Utah, Nevada, Oregon and northeastern California at the time of the Lewis and Clark expedition 200 years ago. The population

today may be fewer than 200,000 -- a decline attributed to the loss of about 50 percent of the birds' sagebrush nesting grounds.

Recently, the birds have been dying in alarming numbers from West Nile virus carried by mosquitoes. Some of the insects hatch on waste water ponds that are a byproduct of the natural gas boom in Colorado, Montana, New Mexico and Wyoming. Millions of gallons of water are being pumped in a process used to extract methane gas.

Last month, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced it would begin reviewing whether the sage grouse warranted inclusion on the Endangered Species List.

Conservation groups have been petitioning the agency to list the species since 2000. Meanwhile, Jim Sims, a former communications director for President Bush's Energy Task Force, is leading the effort by a Colorado-based coalition of Western businesses to block the listing.

Sims was out of the country when the Los Angeles Times sought to reach him, but his strategy for opposing a sage-grouse listing was detailed on the coalition's Web site. It calls for meeting "with key administration players in Washington, D.C., to hone strategic plan ... unleash[ing] grass-roots opposition to a listing, thus providing some cover to the political leadership at Department of Interior and throughout the administration." And "funding scientific studies" that conclude the sage grouse is not endangered. Conservationists say the campaign to oppose listing is less about science and more about protecting business interests.

"They cast the listing of the sage grouse as the end of the Western economy as we know it. Their rhetoric is a bit extreme," said Erik Molvar, a biologist with the Biodiversity Conservation Alliance, a group that supports listing. "It is possible to drill in a way that can allow the sage grouse and other animals to coexist. It just costs more, and they are unwilling to pay for it."

There are protections in place requiring that roads, wells and other structures be kept at least a quarter of a mile from sage grouse breeding grounds and two miles away from nesting areas during nesting seasons. But at least one study -- which was paid for by the oil and gas industry -- concluded that the protections weren't sufficient. Moreover, the field work for that study was conducted four years ago when the overall well density was much lower.

According to Freudenthal, well spacing in the Pinedale area has shrunk from 160 acres to 5 acres. Across the state, nearly 60,000 new wells are expected to be drilled within the next 10 years. Many of those wells will be placed on land used not only by sage grouse but also a variety of wildlife, including elk and antelope, that depend on undisturbed open space to forage, breed and raise their young.

The energy industry fears that invoking the Endangered Species Act would put large areas off limits to drilling. The law could be especially difficult to work around in Wyoming, where 80 percent of the state is considered sage-grouse habitat.

"Listings are not good for the oil and gas industry; anything we can do to prevent a species from being listed is good for the industry," said Dru Bower, vice president of the Petroleum Association of Wyoming. "If the sage grouse is listed, it would have a dramatic effect on oil and gas development in the state of Wyoming. It would have a dramatic effect on our ability to develop public lands. It would put us out of business." Jim Sims' coalition, the Partnership for the West, blames the effort to list the sage grouse on "environmental extremists [who] have converged on the American West and in an effort to stop virtually all economic growth and development. They want to restrict business and industry at every turn."

Although the governor of Wyoming has not endorsed listing sage grouse as endangered, his objections to increased drilling, expressed in a letter to the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, reflected a broad concern among ranchers, hunters and a variety of residents that the proliferation of wells, if not carefully regulated, "will only serve to jeopardize sage grouse habitat, migration corridors, crucial habitat and other important resources."