



August 10, 2006

## Sage Grouse: Prefer Sage, not "Stuff"

By Rebecca Huntington

If there's a single message wildlife biologist Jack Connelly wants to get across it's this: "If we don't have sagebrush, we will not have sage grouse."

Sounds like a no-brainer. But Connelly, who works for the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, said in a recent presentation at a University of Wyoming research station that special interest groups and politicians have worked hard to muddy the message.

The sage grouse's dependence on sagebrush for survival could stand in the way of new subdivisions, natural gas wells, roads, wind farms and livestock grazing, to name a few human activities. Just as fights over logging old growth forests put the spotted owl at center stage, the current debate over energy and other development across the West's sagebrush grasslands has turned the spotlight on sage grouse.

Now Connelly said he's seeing a trend where promoters of such interests try to downplay the importance of sagebrush in the sage grouse diet.

The birds depend exclusively on sagebrush in winter, when the plants available to sage grouse can be greatly limited by snow cover, he said.

Connelly described how developers around Sun Valley are looking for professional biologists to say tearing up sagebrush for housing won't harm sage grouse. So far, the developers haven't had much luck, he said. Connelly also described a Bush administration appointee who wanted to edit a sage grouse report to downplay the birds' dependence on sagebrush by stating that the species would eat other "stuff." Livestock interests, meanwhile, have attempted to portray sage grouse as dependent not on sagebrush but on "cattle manure" for survival, Connelly said. These would-be range specialists argue that the manure promotes bugs, which the grouse eat, he said. Sage grouse do eat insects, but insects flourish just fine amid healthy grasses growing beneath sagebrush without the extra fertilizer, according to Connelly.

"It's nonsense," Connelly said.