

August 27, 2007

## Interior Dept. official says action must be taken on sage grouse

By Matthew Brown (AP)

BILLINGS, Mont. - The federal government must take immediate action to conserve shrinking sage grouse populations - even as questions remain over the cause of the bird's decline, an Interior Department official said Monday.

In recent months, the Interior Department tightened oversight of some new oil and gas activity in Wyoming and Montana in a bid to slow development in areas with high numbers of sage grouse. That came despite questions raised by industry representatives who argue evidence linking sage grouse declines to drilling are inconclusive.

Julie Jacobson, deputy assistant secretary for minerals management at the Interior Department, said a lawsuit hanging over the agency has forced it to act before the bird can again become a candidate for the endangered species list.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 2005 rejected a petition to have the bird listed as threatened or endangered. A lawsuit pending before a federal judge in Idaho seeks to force the government to reconsider.

"We can't simply sit back at the department level and wait" for a decision in the case, Jacobson told members of the Montana Petroleum Association during their annual meeting Monday. "We don't have a very good record on ESA (endangered species act) legislation."

Jacobson acknowledged other factors have also contributed to the decades-long decline of sage grouse across its 11-state habitat - from grazing and agriculture to road building and residential development. But the energy boom sweeping the West has emerged for sage grouse advocates as one of the most significant pending threats to the bird.

Renee Taylor, a Casper, Wyo., scientist working for the oil and gas industry, argued Monday that her review of three decades of data on sage grouse populations in Wyoming showed the environmentalists' concerns were overstated.

While drilling knocked back numbers to some extent, Taylor said, the birds often bounced back by relocating or rebuilding their populations over time.

"The birds are not extirpated unless you have extremely dense development," she said.

She added that drought has been the "driver" in sage grouse declines.

Taylor's work has been touted by oil and gas executives, who criticized other studies out of the University of Wyoming and the University of Montana that indicated a strong link between increased drilling and fewer breeding sage grouse.

But a Bureau of Land Management official said the federal government was "being cautious until the scientists can agree."

In July, the agency withdrew 73,000 acres from a planned oil and gas lease auction because of possible sage grouse impacts. Earlier this month, the agency notified companies in Wyoming that permits to drill in areas considered prime sage grouse habitat would be given low priority for processing.

"We've got to allow some development. We also need to be aware of key sage grouse areas so what we do isn't irreversible," said Howard Lemm, BLM's associate state director in Montana.