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Gathering 'round the grouse

By Dustin Bleizeffer

It's difficult to know exactly how energy development, recreation and agriculture across the West might be forced to change if the greater sage grouse is given protection under the Endangered Species Act.

But some argue at least some of the effects are already appearing, as stakeholders are crossing institutional and jurisdictional boundaries in an attempt to prevent such listing.

"It's no longer the regulator and the regulated. It's about cooperated efforts, and it's really the only way to move forward," said Kevin McAleese of the Sand County Foundation in Colorado.

The mere threat of listing two years ago has spawned numerous working groups, initiatives and partnerships spanning all levels of industry and government.

"The hammer of the Endangered Species Act is a motivating factor for people to work together. I think these kinds of partnerships are valuable, whether or not a species is listed," McAleese said.

The prospect of sage grouse listing was revived last week by U.S. District Judge Lynn Winmill in Idaho. He ordered the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to start another 12-month review of whether the grouse deserves federal protection, after finding that a 2005 decision against listing was inappropriately influenced by politics and not based on science.

McAleese is also board president of the Cooperative Sagebrush Initiative. From California and Wyoming landowners to Department of Interior officials and conservationists, this group's partners span even more territory than the sage grouse's 11-state region.

The commonality among this mix of interests is the belief that not only can they coordinate their efforts in ways that conserve sage grouse habitat, but that they can have a net gain.

Oil and gas companies focus on consolidating their pipelines, roads and other facilities, and try to speed up reclamation using native forbs and grasses. Ranchers can use rotational grazing to shrink the acreage required to raise cattle.

McAleese said many techniques to conserve and improve the sagebrush biome are proven -- but only at a small scale. Conservation efforts must expand and be coordinated on a regional basis. And unless the work is painstakingly measured, monitored and demonstrated beyond a doubt, it's all for naught.

"We have to do a better job of demonstrating a credible outcome," McAleese said.

The Cooperative Sagebrush Initiative is focused on gaining some assurances from the Interior Department that those who voluntarily commit to habitat conservation not be subject to further stipulations should the sage grouse become listed.

The group is also pursuing what's known as the "restoration economy," a sort of conservation credit system that could someday attract private investment dollars.

"We've been trying to come up with a scientifically credible method of measuring the biological and ecological components to provide net conservation benefits," McAleese said. "The value of that is it taps into the power of the free market, and that could mobilize a lot of the necessary funding to get this done."

Much uncertainty

Energy industry officials are not prepared to say that an endangered species listing for the greater sage grouse would result in a net decrease in drilling and production activity.

Instead, they focus on what the mere possibility of a listing has already thrust upon the industry: spending more time, money and expertise on rangeland management.

"Overall, the industry needs to work toward minimizing disturbance, improving habitat and work toward greater cooperation with state and federal agencies and private landowners," said Paul Ulrich, spokesman for EnCana Oil & Gas.

Increasing pressure from a potential sage grouse listing has already tightened federal stipulations in the Powder River Basin. Shorter drilling windows and increasing reclamation requirements boost the cost of doing business.

McAleese said the same is true for agriculture and nearly every enterprise that involves the sagebrush landscape.

"It is conceivable that wildlife agencies and federal land managers could put so many restrictions on drilling activities or coal mining, or building transmission corridors, that it just becomes uneconomic and a company could decide it can get a better return on their money somewhere else," McAleese said.