

News

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Sage grouse a hot topic in D.C.

By Dave Woodson, Staff Writer

WELLS - Sage grouse and what to do about them has become a hot topic in the nation's capital, according to an aide to Gov. Kenny Guinn.

He told the Nevada Legislative Committee on Public Lands during a hearing here on Friday that potential listing of the bird as an endangered species is among the more important issues under scrutiny by federal Department of the Interior Secretary Gail Norton.

"It has become over the last six months the top priority for Secretary Norton," said Steve Robinson, an adviser to the governor on wildlife, conservation and rural Nevada issues. "This is the biggest thing on her plate right now."

He said the Bush administration is watching the process regarding the future status of the sage grouse.

"The policy makers with the president's team are keeping an eye on this," Robinson noted.

He said Norton had established a sage grouse task force that included top officials in both the U.S. Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service.

Robinson told the panel of lawmakers that Nevada is among the states that would be hardest hit by an endangered species listing.

"This is the big one," he said. "The impact is here in Nevada."

Elko County Commissioner John Ellison said the impact of such a listing would be strongly felt throughout the county.

"It would be devastating to Elko County," he said.

Robert Williams, supervisor of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Nevada, said the agency could issue one of three possible rulings.

He said the listing of the bird as endangered species could be found to be warranted, not warranted or warranted but precluded by other higher priorities.



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Nevada Supervisor Robert Williams, with microphone, and Nevada Department of Wildlife Director Terry Crawford, right, testify before the Nevada Legislative Committee on Public Lands during a hearing Friday in Wells.

"Warranted would have costs to the West that are incalculable at this time," Robinson said.

He said the area would be no better off if the final decision is to list the sage grouse as warranted but precluded.

"Federal agencies will treat that as a listing in their activities in the field," Robinson said.

Nevada Department of Wildlife Director Terry Crawforth told the panel that a federal ESA listing for sage grouse would not be productive.

"A listing for the sage grouse will do absolutely nothing for the bird," he said.

Crawforth said he hoped that the listing would not take place.

"The science will carry the day and we will not list this bird," he said.

Crawforth said a listing would have a drastic impact on all land uses in Nevada including grazing, recreation and mining.

"It would make it significantly more difficult," he said. "Any land management activities would have to consider endangered species in planning."

Williams said the Fish and Wildlife Service is in the process of preparing to review the documentation that has been presented to his agency, which has a deadline of Thursday to receive comments.

"We are in the process of collecting information," he said.

Crawforth said the state had prepared a 702-page document over a six-year period that would be submitted to the federal agency.

He said that the Nevada Department of Wildlife had been in the "forefront" of addressing the sage grouse issue and its document contains "everything we know about sage grouse and its habitat."

Robinson said Guinn was also deeply involved in the issue and had promoted the creation of a governor's panel with seven local area planning groups that have created 63 population management units in a statewide plan.

"Nevada is far ahead of the other states," Sen. Dean Rhoads, R-Tuscarora, chairman of the committee, pointed out.

Crawforth said the effort by the volunteers in working on the sage grouse plan had been tremendous, with more than 10,000 man-hours involved in the project.

"I think this is a first in this kind of work regarding a species," he said.

Crawforth said if all the effort expended by the state to develop its own management plan should be ignored by the Fish and Wildlife Service, it would be difficult to energize civil involvement in other public lands issues.

"Citizen involvement has really been impressive," Robinson added.

Williams responded that "local plans are not necessarily for naught" but did not elaborate on that statement.

Meanwhile, the clock continues to run down toward a final decision.

"The field recommendation will probably be made in November," Williams said.

He said he expected a final decision on the ESA listing to be published in the federal register in January of next year.

Crawforth said the state was ready to go forward with its management plans.

"I think we know enough about the sage grouse that we can begin implementing plans," he said.

The potential listing of the sage grouse is the result of a petition filed by a coalition of 20 environmental groups claiming that the bird population has been in decline. It claimed that there were about 140,000 sage grouse remaining, or about 8 percent of their historical numbers.

While admitting that the sage grouse population has declined, Crawforth took issue with the numbers.

He said the estimate is closer to 400,000 across the West with 88,000 adult breeding birds in Nevada alone.

"At this time of year with chicks on the ground you can probably double that number," Crawforth said.