



## COMMENTARY

### Sacrificing the Sage Grouse

by Jim Motavalli

How many *E Magazine* readers are surprised that, in the wake of what EPA head Michael Leavitt calls a "mandate" for the Bush administration's scorched-earth environmental policies, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) would sacrifice the greater sage grouse to protect western oil and gas interests?

That's certainly the way it looks after the *New York Times* revealed December 5 that a Bush Interior Department political appointee with no wildlife background, Julie MacDonald, inserted herself into the decision-making process. The consequence: USFWS is recommending that the highly endangered bird not be listed as such under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).



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In the early 1800s, at the time that Lewis and Clark made their epic voyage, there were as many as two or three million sage grouse. There were still huge flocks of them a century later. Today, there are an estimated 140,000 to 500,000 left. Why? Like the bamboo-dependent panda, they only want to eat one thing: in this case, sagebrush. They also use sagebrush for protection and shelter. As *USA Today* reports, there was once 300 million acres of sagebrush in the western U.S., but about half of it has disappeared, with energy development one of the culprits.

According to a post on the *High Country News* website, "Remaining sage grouse habitat is being destroyed by gas drilling, mining, and off-road vehicles; grazed by livestock; invaded by weeds; sprayed with herbicides; consumed by agricultural conversion and municipal development; and fragmented by roads, fencelines, and utility corridors." There is an estimated 150 million acres of sagebrush habitat left across the West and much of it is degraded, says the Bureau of Land Management.

Interior Secretary Gale Norton, who routinely opposes new species listing, says that protecting the sage grouse would have a larger economic impact than saving the northern spotted owl. All the favorite "Wise Use" property rights concerns would be affected, from ranching and oil drilling to off-road vehicle use.

MacDonald, a deputy assistant interior secretary, created her own version of the federal biologists' report on the sage grouse, complete with what the *Times* called "flashes of her strong property-rights background, and her deference to industry views." Her version of the report

eliminated many of the references to the scientifically based 600-page conservation assessment on the sage grouse. She apparently doesn't agree that there were ever millions of sage grouse, claiming that this is "simply a fairy tale, constructed out of whole cloth." And who says they'll only eat sagebrush? "They will eat other stuff if it is available," she opined, without offering any evidence. The *Times* says that the grouse's seasonal dependence on sagebrush is "uncontested among biologists."

The sage grouse has the misfortune to live in the vicinity of likely fossil fuel deposits in Wyoming and Montana, so with Bush riding tall in the saddle it's probably doomed. "The Rocky Mountain region has been high on the Bush administration's list of areas to increase oil and natural gas production, much to the dismay of environmentalists," reported Reuters. A grouse listing would have restricted natural gas drilling in states like Wyoming. And so the USFWS director, Steve Williams, is telling reporters, "There's a low risk of extinction." Williams presented his "findings" to the Western Governors Association, which has campaigned hard against a sage grouse listing. Williams' solution is to continue current policies, which have overseen a marked decline in the bird's numbers.

The House Committee on Resources, under the direction of the ESA-hating Richard Pombo (R-CA), managed to proclaim that the absence of a listing decision was "good news for species recovery." Pombo claims that the ESA has compiled "a 99 percent rate of failure in species recovery. It is ironic, but the finding against listing the sage grouse is great news for those interested in actually recovering this species. Private conservation and recovery efforts work, the ESA does not." But with those programs in place, the grouse continues its march to extinction.

Nicole Rosmarino, conservation director for the group Forest Guardians, says we're not seeing fair and objective science at work here. "I believe there was political meddling in this decision, which is par for the course in the Bush administration," she says. "Julie MacDonald's efforts here are emblematic of the administration's commitment to junk science."

Rosmarino cites as a similar example the mountain plover, which has declined 63 percent over the last few decades. "It's well recognized to be a bird in crisis, and was proposed for ESA listing in 1999 and 2002, largely because of litigation from conservation groups," Rosmarino says. "But then USFWS withdrew the listing proposal, which there was no reason on Earth for them to do. It's incredibly politicized, and they are dodging any listing action." The stats are damning, she adds: Under George Herbert Walker Bush, 59 species were listed each year. Under Bill Clinton, 69 a year. Under G.W. Bush, just 31 since he's been in office, and every one was the result of lawsuits. "He has not listed one on his own accord, an abysmal performance," Rosmarino says.

Mark Salvo of the Sagebrush Sea Project says his group received MacDonald's version of the assessment anonymously in the mail, then leaked it to the *Times'* Felicity Barringer. "Given the substance and tone of Ms. MacDonald's comments, this is an extreme case of the politicization of science under the Bush administration," Salvo says. "There were once millions of sage grouse, according to the best available science. They have experienced a precipitous decline, again according to the best available science. She not only has an agenda in making those comments, but in doing so she discredits some of the very good science on the sage grouse." The first draft

of the sage grouse report, before MacDonald got her fingerprints on it, was in Salvo's opinion "an honest assessment."

Some 1,265 species are ESA listed, but conservationists say an estimated 6,000 should be added. Some species have gone extinct waiting to be included on the list (which is, by itself, no guarantee of salvation).

I've never seen a sage grouse, and unless I hurry, I may never have that pleasure. Other species are also in the crosshairs. Pombo says he will "build on" his successful efforts to privatize sage grouse conservation to "help strengthen and update the Endangered Species Act."