



## **Rocky Mts. energy groups to fight bird protection**

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**By Judith Crosson**

DENVER (Reuters) - The natural gas industry and environmental groups are squaring off in the Rocky Mountains over a small chicken-like bird that makes its home in one of America's hottest gas drilling regions.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service agreed last month to look into the possibility of protecting the greater sage grouse under the Endangered Species Act, a move that would limit development around its habitat in 11 Western states.

Once common across the American West and famed for its elaborate courtship rituals, the greater sage grouse has sharply dwindled in numbers over the past century as the region's human population has expanded.

Conservation groups say the bird that pioneer explorers Lewis and Clark called the "cock of the plains," known for puffing up its throat pouch to attract mates, may soon be pushed to the brink of extinction.

"This species may be in trouble and we need to look at it further," Fish and Wildlife Service spokeswoman Sharon Rose said.

Energy producers are concerned that more protection for the sage grouse will hamper drilling in states like Wyoming and Colorado. The Rocky Mountain region has become a key area for natural gas drilling, especially the methane-rich natural gas contained deep within underground coal beds.

About 80 percent of Wyoming is considered greater sage grouse habitat, according to Dru Bower, vice president of the Petroleum Association of Wyoming.

"You can see how a listing of the sage grouse would be detrimental not only to oil and gas but also to other industries," Bower said.

Currently, drilling activity is limited around the bird's breeding areas for several months in the spring.

"It has not been easy in some areas," she said, adding that the fear is that if the sage grouse were listed as endangered, supervision would move to federal from state authorities and more restrictions would be put in place.

## REPORT DUE SOON

A consortium called the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies is expected to issue a report this month assessing the status of the sage grouse population. The report will be reviewed by the Ecological Society of America, a nonprofit organization of scientists, and then go to the Fish and Wildlife Service.

After all the information and comments from the public are examined, the Fish and Wildlife Service, an agency of the U.S. Department of the Interior, would then make its recommendation, possibly by the end of 2004, Rose said.

Clait Braun, a wildlife biologist who heads up a consulting firm, Grouse Inc., and who spent 30 years with the Colorado Division of Wildlife, said the grouse population has plunged from at least 2 million birds in the mid-19th century to between 140,000 and 200,000 today.

He said the bird's habitat has been increasingly fragmented by livestock grazing, mining and oil and gas development.

Braun, who said he has seen early drafts of the state consortium report, said state wildlife agencies are nervous about the possibility of the bird being listed.

"If the sage grouse is listed, management of public lands will have to change, which could have an impact on hunting of deer and elk," he said.

The early draft is full of historic data on the dwindling population, but less strong on the effects of oil and gas development or West Nile virus because those effects are still being measured, he said.

Bower said local groups of environmentalists, scientists, ranchers and representatives of other industries have been working on the issue in Wyoming since last year and such local targeting may be the best way to go.