

Letters from the West  
A Blog by Rocky Barker

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## Sage grouse reports shows Obama administration's challenge in the West

Interior secretary Dirk Kempthorne was hoping he could delist the sage grouse before he left office and the new Obama Administration could decide the fate of development across the **sagebrush sea**.

But the Bush Justice Department warned that to make the decision before U.S. District Judge B. Lynn Winmill's order requires it would undercut its credibility. So instead on the last business day of his administration Kempthorne's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service released an interim status update.

The bird is the canary in the coal mine of the health of millions of acres of sagebrush steppe habitat across 11 western states. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service must decide by May whether to list the bird after a Winmill decision in a case filed on behalf of the Western Watersheds Project.

If the sage grouse is listed it could have the same kind of impact on public land ranching that the listing of the spotted owl had on logging in the Pacific Northwest's old-growth forests in the late 1980s. It also could limit the development of wind, geothermal and solar energy across the western deserts and affect utility transmission line connections to these inherently widespread alternative energy developments.

Scientists said in 2004 the decision could have gone both ways. The report shows that the threats are worse but it asserts that measures to protect the birds have also increased. Here's an example:

**"The amount and scale of oil and gas exploration and development has expanded since 2005, as has loss of habitat due to increased fire frequency which has exacerbated the spread of invasive species such as cheatgrass. These concerns were identified as primary threats in our 2005 finding and remain so, but with more intensity and on a larger scale. Additional concerns include an increase in the use of sagebrush habitat for renewable energy such as wind power, and the increased threat posed by West Nile Virus. Concomitantly with this increase in threats, there has been a dearth of effective State or Federal measures adopted to assist in avoiding, minimizing or mitigating the known significant impacts to greater sage grouse."**

Despite its effort to put the best light on the situation the report shows the real challenge faced by managers to reverse the decline of the birds.

**"Approximately 50 percent of these birds occur in a relatively small portion of the species range (within 1 of 7 floristic regions or State wildlife agency "Management Zones"), and 90 percent occur within 3 Management Zones, with the greatest intensity of threats generally concentrated in these areas."**

In others word the bird's main habitat occurs in the same area where most of the threats occur.

"This report and the Service's interpretation of it are a study in contrasts: while the science supports protecting the sage-grouse, Bush appointees refuse to admit the need for federal safeguards," said Mark Salvo, Director of the Sagebrush Sea Campaign for WildEarth Guardians.