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Interior official: Sage grouse may avoid listing

By Scott Sonner, Associated Press

RENO, Nev. » Documentation of an "impressive" number of steps being taken to save the sage grouse from extinction may be enough to keep the bird off the U.S. list of protected species despite significant loss of its habitat to wildfires across much of the West in recent years, a top Interior Department official said.

Assistant Interior Secretary Stephen Allred emphasized he will play no role in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's upcoming decision on whether the greater sage grouse warrants protection under the Endangered Species Act across 11 Western states.

But Allred said during interviews while attending a wildfire conference in Reno on Tuesday and Wednesday his department has made some significant policy changes aimed at bolstering populations since USFWS rejected a listing petition in 2005. He believes the bird would be better off in the long run if it is not listed as threatened or endangered.

"From a practical standpoint, the identified measures I've seen encourages me that we are doing what we need to do," said Allred, assistant secretary for land and mineral management.

"They are pretty impressive. There's a considerable difference from six years ago," he told The Associated Press.

"You lose so much flexibility when you list that the ability to do what I'm going to call sort of 'out of the box' things to improve (habitat) is severely restricted," he said. "So I am hopeful that what we are seeing is that we are dealing with the issue and that will make a difference and it won't be listed."

A judge in Idaho overturned the Fish and Wildlife Service's decision last December amid allegations Interior Department managers interfered with the science used in assessing the sage grouse and ordered the agency to conduct another review.

Sharon Rose, a spokeswoman for the wildlife service in Denver, on Thursday said the agency is still gathering and reviewing information and no imminent decision on a listing is expected.

The chicken-sized game bird is found in 11 Western states on sagebrush plains and high desert from Colorado to California and north to the Canadian border. Its population has been declining for decades and it now occupies about half of its original, year-round habitat. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimated in 2005 there were 100,000 to 500,000 sage grouse.

Federal officials and private researchers have estimated that an ecosystem described as the sagebrush "steppe" covered anywhere from 150 million acres to 300 million acres of North America prior to white settlement.

A federal listing could have an impact on livestock grazing, oil and gas drilling, mining, construction of energy transmission lines and other development.

Allred said the new decision will be based in part on the condition of the bird's population and remaining habitat, and part on the steps that have been taken and are continuing to protect the bird on federal, state and private lands. He expects the agency to produce a status report on the new review in the coming days or weeks.

"Certainly we've identified just within the Interior Department a lot of measures that are in place as well as what the states and others have done," Allred said.

One of the biggest changes was adopted last summer when for the first time, the department directed the Bureau of Land Management -- which manages much of the land that is home to the grouse -- to make protection of traditional grouse mating grounds known as "leks" a priority second only to human life and structures when fighting wildfires, he said.

"Before, protecting sage grouse leks was not a primary focus. It is now. Each of the fire offices have maps that identify where those leks are thought to be located. So that's a primary objective in terms of fighting fires," Allred said.

A study released in October by an environmental group that advocates federal protection for the bird concluded four-fifths of sage grouse habitat is adversely affected by either livestock grazing, natural gas and oil development or invasive weeds. It singled out livestock grazing -- permitted on 91 percent of the bird's range -- as "the most ubiquitous use of sage grouse habitat on federal public land."

"This illustrates and quantifies, we believe for the first time, that the sagebrush steppe is one of the least -- if not the least -- protected landscapes in the United States," said Mark Salvo, director of WildEarthGuardians based in Chandler, Ariz.

Allred said the agency believes wildfires and invasive weeds cause the most harm to sage grouse, not livestock grazing. He said recent research suggests some grazing in areas overgrown with cheatgrass actually reduce fire threats and therefore benefits the bird.