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EDITORIAL

## Bird in the Brush

In 2004, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service decided that it did not need to list the sage grouse — whose habitat and diet are defined by sagebrush — as threatened or endangered. Ranchers, developers and the petroleum industry all breathed a sigh of relief. Now, Federal District Judge B. Lynn Winmill has ordered the Fish and Wildlife Service to review its conclusions about the sage grouse. We hope that the agency will remember that its responsibility is to reach an impartial decision based on the “best science” — something it forgot the first time around.

According to Judge Winmill, the agency ignored the conclusions of experts it consulted. He also accused a former deputy assistant secretary at the Interior Department, Julie MacDonald, of “editing scientific conclusions” and intimidating Fish and Wildlife Service staff members. Judge Winmill called her conduct “inexcusable.” Ms. MacDonald, who has been accused of interfering on behalf of industry and landowners in several other species-listing decisions, resigned from her job in May.

Judge Winmill’s ruling brings the sage grouse back to center stage in the battle over public lands and development in the West. **Politically and economically speaking, it is a keystone species, one whose legal status will determine patterns of grazing, urban expansion and, especially, oil and gas development over much of the American West.** Sage grouse numbers have plummeted in the past century, almost entirely because of human exploitation of its habitat. In Wyoming, oil and gas exploration has already destroyed its breeding grounds, and there are plans for tens of thousands of new wells in sage grouse country.

It’s tempting to say that the least a dwindling species can expect is a fair, scientific assessment of its numbers and survival chances. Over the past seven years, we have learned that even that is too much to expect from the Bush administration, especially when the species in question occupies terrain that is coveted by ranchers, developers and the petroleum industry. In the case of the sage grouse, the Fish and Wildlife Service appears to have done a better job serving industry than the public or the grouse. It is time to redress that mistake.