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Rare Sage Grouse Might Not Get U.S. Protection

By Judith Crosson

DENVER (Reuters) - Western states could avoid tough restrictions on oil and gas drilling if they show that they have programs to protect the greater sage grouse, avoiding a federal designation of the chicken-like bird as an endangered species, Interior Secretary Gale Norton said on Friday.

Listing a species as a candidate under the U.S. Endangered Species Act triggers a number of restrictions on commercial activities such as oil and gas drilling and ranching, which the industries say would harm them.

"It's not just the numbers but the trend. If the states can show that the bird population can recover and was not likely to plummet" then the state programs could be sufficient, Norton said after addressing a business group in Denver.

Environmentalists say the bird's population has fallen from 2 million birds in the mid-19th century to between 140,000 and 200,000 today. They say that the species known for puffing up its throat pouch to attract mates could soon be pushed to the brink of extinction.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, an agency of the Interior Department, is facing a December deadline on whether to list the bird as a candidate species for protection, which would put restrictions in place for commercial activities.

In her appearance to the Colorado Business Leadership council, Norton said the Endangered Species Act was unique among U.S. laws because decisions are based on what biologists say is the best course of action to protect a species.

Governors from 11 western states in a recent letter to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service argued that local communities were already taking steps to protect the sage grouse and that 64 local groups had been formed to study the problem.

Energy producers are concerned that more protection for the sage grouse would 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.