

The Salt Lake Tribune

SUNDAY ◦ January 4, 2004

EDITORIAL

Common enemies

The belief that my enemy's enemy is my friend has been a dangerous one over the years. Witness, for example, the many thuggish dictatorships the United States cozied up to throughout the Cold War.

But the actual existence of common enemies faced by cattle ranchers and wildlife could make for a powerful alliance that would serve the legitimate long-term interests of both, if only those involved would open their eyes to the possibilities.

Utah ranchers today are fearing that a decision expected early this week from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will move a once-common bird called the greater sage grouse toward the protections of the Endangered Species Act. If the government does start the process toward protecting the ground-dwelling bird, whose numbers have dropped dramatically over the last 20 years, ranchers fear their ability to graze their herds on public lands will be subjected to more restrictions.

But public lands are in need of more restrictions, and would be even if there were no such beast as the greater sage grouse. Ranching throughout the West, already heavily subsidized with cheap grazing permits, is threatened by basically the same factors that have pushed the grouse and its cousins to the brink of extinction -- drought, urban sprawl and overly aggressive oil and gas exploration being the most prominent.

The drought, of course, is not something that can be legislated or regulated away. But the simple recognition that parched land cannot support as many living things, wild or domesticated, should lead to temporary limitations on grazing, saving the land for both cattle and wildlife.

Another common enemy of farmer and fowl is the creeping growth of exurbia, noisy and polluting development that spoils both the lure of the wide open spaces for the cattleman and the nesting habitat for the grouse. Cows and quail, properly managed, are much more likely to be able to successfully cohabit the Intermountain West than are, say, farmers and factories, or pasture and pipelines.

If the ranchers play their cards right, and with a little more political savvy, they might get behind ideas trotted out elsewhere that the ranchers even be paid for preserving wildlife habitat on their own lands and for limiting or surrendering their permits to graze on public land in ways that preserve or restore areas key to the survival of various flora and fauna.

As both the nation and the state of Utah become increasingly urbanized, farmers and ranchers must make up for lost electoral clout by making more friends in legislative bodies and regulatory agencies. The best way to win such friends is to be, and to be seen as being, as environmentally friendly as possible.

A good way to start would be to save the greater sage grouse.