

# TIME

NOTEBOOK

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## Payback Time For The Cock Of The Prairie

By MARGOT ROOSEVELT

Is the strutting sage grouse, iconic bird of the Western steppe, an endangered species? No doubt about it, say environmentalists, who petitioned for federal protection for the "cock of the prairie," as Lewis and Clark fondly dubbed it. Millions once darkened the skies across 16 states, but development has decimated its sagebrush range. Today an estimated 140,000 are left — some 8% of its historic numbers. And given the breakneck pace of Western economic growth, some biologists fear the grouse could disappear within 50 years.

But Bush Administration officials told a gathering of Western Governors last week that the bird is not threatened with extinction and does not need protection under the Endangered Species Act. That was welcome news for the Partnership for the West, a coalition of ranching and energy interests that mounted a fierce yearlong lobbying campaign against federal involvement. "A sage grouse listing would be used by radical environmentalists to take control of vast public and private lands," says spokesman Jim Sims. "It would be the spotted owl on steroids."

The fight over the chicken-size bird, whose 110 million-acre habitat is 12 times bigger than the spotted owl's, may have just begun. Industry groups plan to pressure next year's friendlier Congress to weaken the 30-year-old endangered-species law. Meanwhile, a score of conservation groups, including lawyers who fought the timber industry over the owl, are preparing to file suit to force a sage grouse listing. By law, such decisions must be based on science alone, but a leaked copy of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's synthesis of biological information shows extensive editing by an Interior Department political appointee. "The only science upon which the Administration based this decision was political science," says Mark Salvo, director of the Sagebrush Sea Campaign. "They are paying back their political base in the grazing and oil and gas industries."