



## Battle brewing over sage grouse protection

By Tom Kenworthy, USA TODAY

PINEDALE, Wyo. — In the heart of the nation's natural gas territory, a bird most Americans have never heard of is threatening a piece of the multibillion-dollar energy industry.

The greater sage grouse, looking much like an oversize quail, is declining in numbers, and federal scientists are weighing whether to put it on the endangered species list. If that happens, it's likely to mean significant restrictions on energy development across a huge swath of the West.

Much of the bird's habitat overlaps with the nation's prime gas drilling territory, in Wyoming, Montana, Colorado and Utah. Grouse advocates argue that the intensive development threatens nesting areas and is pushing the bird toward extinction — a claim that could significantly disrupt the Bush administration's push for a gas industry boom in the West.

Hundreds of natural gas wells have been drilled around Pinedale in recent years, and thousands more are on the way. But much of the drilling would grind to a halt if the grouse's habitat came under federal protection.

"A listing of sage grouse under the Endangered Species Act would have a dramatic impact on oil and gas activity," says Dru Bower, vice president of the Petroleum Association of Wyoming.

The fight over the grouse is about more than a bird. It symbolizes a larger dispute over the future of the West and the region's vast network of public land. Many expect the bird to touch off an ecological battle not seen since the feud over the northern spotted owl in the 1990s ended up devastating the timber industry in the Pacific Northwest.

Conservationists are pushing hard because they say time is running out for the grouse.

"We need to take drastic actions," says Peter Aengst, a Montana-based activist with the Wilderness Society. Voluntary conservation efforts "could be a case of fiddling while Rome burns."

While it's impossible to gauge just how much the grouse's endangered species listing could cost the energy industry, many experts, including Interior Secretary Gale Norton, say the economic impact could be enormous. "The sage grouse occupies nearly 12 times as much land as the northern spotted owl," Norton said recently.

A federal judge instigated an uproar in 1989 when he issued an injunction on federal timber sales to protect many forests where spotted owls live.



Wildlife officials say the greater sage grouse is unusually sensitive to human activity. It needs unbroken stands of sagebrush.

Millions of acres were set aside for the owls, and thousands of jobs were lost in the woods and in sawmills as the timber industry adjusted to downsizing.

The lesson isn't forgotten. Stakes are high enough that energy development supporters have begun a major effort to block the sage grouse from making it on the endangered species list. The campaign is being waged by a non-profit organization called Partnership for the West. Based in Golden, Colo., the group represents oil, gas, mining and ranching interests.

In an internal memo that was obtained by environmental groups, the coalition has outlined a comprehensive campaign to discredit the grouse's endangered listing. Among the tactics: "Unleash grassroots opposition to a listing, thus providing some cover to the political leadership" in the Bush administration.

A sage grouse listing, concluded Executive Director Jim Sims in an e-mail to supporters, "would cause economic disruption that would make the Northern Spotted Owl decision look minuscule by comparison."

Here in Pinedale, a recreation hub that serves as a gateway to the hiking, fishing and hunting splendors of the Bridger-Teton wilderness, the energy development boom is seen everywhere.

Six years ago, the huge Jonah field south of Pinedale had 58 producing gas wells. Today, there are 600, and a federal Bureau of Land Management proposal calls for 3,100 more. That would average out to a gas well every 10 acres.

"We are looking at 9,000 to 10,000 new wells over the next 10 years," says Linda Baker, a Pinedale librarian and an organizer with a local group that promotes wildlife conservation. "We have to have a balance between the Wyoming heritage of outdoor recreation and the energy needs of the country."

The energy development around Pinedale overlaps with an important migratory route for big game such as antelope and mule deer, and some of the best grouse habitat in the west.

A ground-nesting bird, the grouse lives at elevations of 4,000 to 9,000 feet, and is almost completely dependent on sagebrush for food and protection from predators. Sagebrush once covered about 155 million acres of the West, but much of it has been lost to cattle grazing, farming, housing developments and fire.

The sage grouse is unusually sensitive to human activity, says Pat Deibert, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist. Deibert is leading the team that will determine by next winter whether the bird should be added to the list of endangered and threatened species.

"They need large stands of unbroken sagebrush," Deibert says. Anything that breaks up those stands — pipelines, roads, houses, invasive plants such as cheat grass that promote fires — is bad for sage grouse. Even something as seemingly benign as an electric pole or cattle fence draws predators such as hawks and ravens.

Just as the northern spotted owl was dependent on so-called old-growth forests with their stands of towering, ancient trees, the sage grouse is dependent on increasingly rare old-growth sagebrush, says grouse specialist Ben Deeble of the National Wildlife Federation.

Grouse, Deeble concludes, "are sort of facing death from a thousand cuts."

Measures are already in place that create buffers around the birds' mating grounds, called leks, where grouse return year after year and engage in their distinctive courtship dances.

But an endangered species listing could place far greater restrictions to protect the birds. Buffers around leks could be extended from a quarter-mile to as much as 2 miles, which would sharply limit drilling activity.

With a number of state and local groups pushing hard to develop sage grouse conservation strategies, the National Wildlife Federation opposes a federal endangered species listing. But other groups take the position that only federal intervention can stem the decline.

In an assessment, the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies said that sage grouse populations have "tended to stabilize" after a period of sharp decline from the 1960s to mid-1980s. But the agencies concluded "we are not optimistic about the future" because of "long-term population declines" combined with continued loss of habitat and new factors such as the birds' susceptibility to West Nile Virus.

"It's a huge concern," says Wyoming Gov. Dave Freudenthal, whose state budget is 60% funded by mineral receipts including coal, gas and oil royalties. "It could be very damaging to the development of our resources."