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Grouse protections 'good for industry'

By Cory Hatch

Conservation groups say new guidelines will help keep sage grouse protected and off the endangered species list, benefitting not only the animals, but also industry.

Several groups such as the Sagebrush Sea Campaign have thrown their support into a sage grouse conservation "blueprint" that aims to increase the animals' population 33 percent by 2015, and distribution 20 percent by 2030.

Written by Clait Braun, a biologist with Grouse Inc., the plan makes specific recommendations about a number of issues affecting sage grouse habitat including management of development, fire, grazing, and invasive species. Conservation groups plan to send the document to the Bureau of Land Management and state agencies in the coming weeks.

"Gas development, primarily... is extremely negative," biologist Erik Molvar with the Biodiversity Conservation Alliance said in a teleconference Thursday. "We need to start thinking about setting aside some fairly large reserves that won't be disturbed."

Biologists maintain that sage grouse populations have declined 93 percent from historic levels, due primarily to human development. Now, 70 percent of sage grouse habitat is on public land, much of which is either developed or earmarked for development by the oil and gas industry.

"Recovering the sage grouse should be the top priority for everyone," said Molvar, who explained that an Endangered Species Act listing for the animal would hurt oil and gas in the long run. "The conservation community has been asking for similar types of reforms for industry projects for a number of years, and we have met with great resistance."

Braun's recommendations include a five and a half kilometer buffer from roads and development around active sage grouse leks. If roads already exist near a lek, wildlife managers should limit travel during the sage-grouse mating season from March 1 to June 20. A lek is a location where male sage-grouse gather to compete for breeding rights while females watch.

"While you're drilling like mad in one area, you have a substantial area elsewhere where you aren't drilling," said Braun. "Those [oil and natural gas leases on public lands] are being approved across the board. Someone needs to make some real strong recommendations and someone needs to implement those recommendations."

The blueprint also says that prescribed fires should be limited to about 50 acres and that wildfires in sagebrush steppe should be "vigorously suppressed," unless rife with conifer trees.

Braun also suggests that livestock should not remove more than 25 percent of the herbaceous vegetation in sage grouse habitat.

According to Fish and Wildlife, sage grouse populations in the United States declined an average of 3.5 percent per year from 1965 to 1985. Now, the agency says the bird's populations have either stabilized or experienced a slight increase. Estimates of the total sage-grouse population in the United States range from 100,000 to 500,000.

In January of 2005, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service denied three petitions to list the sage grouse under the Endangered Species Act, saying "sage grouse are not likely to become endangered or threatened in the foreseeable future." Fish and Wildlife did, however, agree that mining and energy development, predation, urbanization, and wildfire threaten sage grouse populations and sagebrush habitat.