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EDITORIAL

A sage ruling or not?

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service last week opted not to add the Gunnison sage grouse to the nation's list of official endangered species, a decision doubtlessly generating widespread sighs of relief among those who believed that the relatively rare avian posed the very real potential of becoming a Western Slope version of the spotted owl.

It's certainly welcome news that areas like increasingly small portions of Glade Park and tens of thousands of acres in southwestern Colorado that are home to an estimated 4,000 Gunnison sage grouse won't be subject to the draconian, federal management decrees that a vast swath of the Pacific Northwest labored under when much of that forested region was declared critical habitat for the spotted owl. That said, no one for a moment should believe that long-term viability for the Gunnison sage grouse is guaranteed or that the bird does not merit special management protections.

"The decision is not a biological document, it's a political document," says Clait Braun, a retired Colorado Division of Wildlife biologist and a man widely recognized as one of the country's foremost experts on Western grouse populations. This corner is familiar with Braun's years of work in the field and, to be quite blunt about it, we'll take his assessment of the overall condition of the Gunnison sage grouse — a cousin to the much more widely distributed Greater sage grouse — over that of the federal wildlife apparatchiks who ultimately report to outgoing Interior Secretary Gale Norton.

We want to be clear. This opinion is not an argument in favor of federal authorities imposing strict restrictions on tens of thousands of acres in Western Colorado by designating them as critical habitat for a newly listed Gunnison sage grouse. It is to say, quite unambiguously, that we have little confidence that the Bush administration will take the ongoing threats to the long-term existence of the Gunnison sage grouse seriously.

After all, it would be a lot easier to take the outgoing Interior chief's high-minded rhetoric in support of what she describes as "the four C's," — communication, consultation and cooperation, all in the service of conservation — if sister Interior agencies like the U.S. Bureau of Land Management weren't eyeing the small, critical habitat of the highly endangered black-footed ferret in northwestern Colorado as new habitat for oil and gas drill rigs.

In point of fact, any argument that the Bush administration is committed to protecting declining sage grouse populations or conservation in any real sense is quite laughable. Contrary to a recent federal "trend analysis" concocted with smoke and mirrors by Norton's hired outside "experts," there has not been a 10 percent increase in Gunnison sage grouse on Glade Park over the past decade. The upland bird has virtually disappeared from Glade Park.

And there's little reason for conservation-minded Coloradans to believe that the populations which do exist around Gunnison and parts of southwestern Colorado will get the necessary protections they need

from the Bush administration's single-minded emphasis on spurring oil and gas development everywhere and anywhere throughout the Rocky Mountain West.