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Battle lines drawn between cattle, grouse, in Bodie Hills

By Wendilyn Grasseschi/ Mammoth Times Staff Writer

As if controversy over a proposed gold mine weren't enough action, the Bodie area found itself in the firing line once again recently, caught squarely in the middle of a battle between cattle and sage grouse.

Western Watersheds Project, an Idaho-based environmental group, filed a lawsuit Nov. 4 against the Bishop office of the Bureau of Land Management challenging the agency's decision to renew 133,000 acres of cattle grazing allotments near the Bodie Hills area.

According to Dr. Michael Connor, the group's California director, the lawsuit was a last-ditch attempt to protect sage grouse by trying to remove all or some of the cows from the area, after an appeal failed earlier this year.

Connor's concern is for the imperiled Bi-state sage grouse, a small, chicken-sized bird found only in a few parts of the Great Basin areas of Nevada and California. According to Connor, the Bodie Hills area is one of the bird's last strongholds, and protecting it is critical to protecting the species from extinction.

"This is one of the areas where there should be the greatest protection," he said. "The Bi-state grouse is declining, yet we have to get a court order to get the BLM to take the strong measures that are needed to conserve the species."

Cattle grazing can destroy the bird's breeding areas, or leks, and cattle compete with the grouse for nutrients and forage, he said. Cattle grazing also requires open water tanks to supply water to the stock, and open water provides places for mosquitoes to breed and spread the always fatal (to grouse) West Nile virus, he said.

"There have been several documented cases of West Nile virus fatalities in the area," he said. The four grazing allotments are in the Aurora Canyon, Potato Peak, Mono Sand Flat and Bodie Mountain areas; all to the northeast of Mono Lake.

Despite repeated attempts, the BLM did not return calls by press time.

Grouse in trouble, feds say

The ante over the grouse was upped this past March when the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service put the grouse on its "candidate species" list, meaning it should be listed as endangered under the federal Endangered Species Act but cannot be at this time due to other competing priorities at the agency.

Western Watershed Project was one of the groups that first petitioned the federal agency to list the bird as endangered, back in 2005. The agency decided not to list it then; conservation groups sued again, and in 2010, the agency said listing was warranted "but presently precluded by other higher priorities."

Given that Mono County, including the Long Valley and Benton areas, holds some of the greatest remaining populations of the Bi-state sage grouse in the country, the ruling put the county and Nevada on alert.

Previous efforts to prevent the bird from being listed by both states were put back on the front burner once again.

Local and federal land agencies try to avoid a species getting listed. Once it is, the federal Fish and Wildlife Service is mandated to enforce strict regulations on the agencies and private landowners to do what it takes to prevent the species from going extinct.

The area's county supervisor, Bob Peters, expressed frustration at the lawsuit, which he just learned about this week.

"Sometimes I think anything that anyone does on the land will result in them getting sued by these groups," he said.

"Grazing is a historic use of the land. It, too, needs to be preserved."