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# \$1.5M deal aims to help declining population of sage grouse

By Associated Press

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GROUSE CREEK, Utah (AP) — A \$1.5 million deal aims to help a species of bird in one of the most remote corners of Utah survive in spite of its trend of declining populations.

Proponents of the deal are emphasizing its value to the future of the troubled sage grouse in Grouse Creek. The bird, known for its colorful mating rituals, has suffered drastic population declines since pioneers settled the West, the Deseret News reported .

But people like senior attorney Michael Saul say it's "naive" to think that small-scale voluntary efforts on private land are sufficient to save the species. Saul is a senior attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity, an Arizona-based nonprofit group that seeks to protect endangered species.

Many environmentalists are angry the bird has not been placed on the federal endangered species list. They accuse the federal government of stifling science and selling out to ranchers and other business interests.

**Grouse numbers dropped drastically in the 1900s, although federal officials say the trend nearly leveled off in the past 20 years.**

**The deal, which also aims to help cattle ranching, essentially builds on the idea that if the lands are managed well for cows, it will ultimately benefit the sage grouse as well.**

The deal will protect the range from what experts call "habitat fragmentation." If development is forbidden, it will reduce the threat that crucial habitat for sage grouse will be divided up by subdivisions, fencing, roads and utility corridors.

Local ranchers largely will follow historic management practices, which includes ripping out pinyon and juniper trees. The theory is they're bad for wildlife and livestock. So-called PJ forests of pinyons and junipers have spread dramatically over the past century, possibly because of aggressive government efforts to suppress wildfires.

As the trees expand their range, they tend to destroy native sagebrush habitat that sage grouse rely on.

The agencies involved as well as the ranchers have a strong incentive to make a deal. They admit that part of their motivation is to avoid land-use restrictions that would protect the sage grouse if it's listed as an endangered species.

**The nearly \$1.5 million that will be paid to the ranchers is from a mix of public and private funds. The federal Natural Resources Conservation Service is paying 40 percent, and the Nature Conservancy is contributing 39 percent. The remaining 21 percent will come from the state's LeRay McAllister Critical Land Conservation Program.**

Saul acknowledges that conservation easements on private land might do some good, but he argues the impact will be minimal because most sage grouse habitat is on federal land.

"It's essentially just throwing good money after bad if the federal government is going to call for open season on sage-grouse habitat on public lands," Saul said.