

Jewell orders firefighting strategy that protects habitat

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BOISE, Idaho — Interior Secretary Sally Jewell is calling for a new wildfire-fighting strategy to protect a wide swath of intermountain West sagebrush country that supports cattle ranching and is home to a struggling bird species.

She issued an order Tuesday seeking a “science-based” approach that safeguards the greater sage grouse while contending with fires that have been especially destructive in the Great Basin region of Idaho, Utah, Nevada, Oregon and California.

The wide-ranging Western bird has been on a collision course in recent years with oil and gas, agriculture and other industries.

Jewell’s order stems at least in part from a conference this fall in Boise that brought together scientists and land managers to find collaborative ways to protect Great Basin rangelands from the plague of increasingly intense wildfires.

One change suggested there by Neil Kornze, director of the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, was to put the protection of rangeland resources ahead of property. The protection of human life would remain the top priority.

“If we were to flip the bottom two, it would change a lot, and it would be hard,” Kornze said in closing remarks at the conference. “It would be hard to explain that to some of our urban and mixed-landscape firefighting partners.”

Jewell’s order creates a task force and sets a March 1 deadline for it to report on guidelines for the 2015 wildfire season.

Task force member Janice Schneider, assistant secretary for Land and Minerals Management, declined to comment on what the new strategy might entail or address whether it would take into account Kornze’s suggestion.

But she noted the Interior secretary’s order marks a “very significant point in time for the department in terms of how it handles fire.”

“We’re undergoing a top-to-bottom review of our fire policy and fire management strategies,” Schneider said.

Rangeland wildfires in the West have grown more massive and destructive in recent decades. Scientists say warmer and dryer summers have extended the region's wildfire seasons, which are made worse by fire-prone invasive species, particularly cheatgrass.

The recurring fires wipe out grazing areas for cattle and native plants such as sagebrush, in turn eliminating the native species that rely on them.

Since 2012, Schneider noted, more than 2.5 million acres of sage grouse habitat has burned on BLM land. It can take decades for sagebrush to return, though nonnative plants often move in first, only to burn a few years later.

Jewell's order is an attempt to stop that cycle and protect the sagebrush steppe that is generally considered part of the iconic Western landscape.

"It's the Western way of life," Schneider said. "We should be taking all the steps to protect this way of life and the economic engine it supports to make sure it's around a really long time."

The greater sage grouse, under consideration for federal protection, already has put on hold development of wind farms and oil and gas drilling plans in some areas. Experts say an endangered species listing for the bird could damage Western states' economies.

Last month, President Barack Obama signed a \$1.1 trillion spending bill with a provision that barred spending on rules to protect the chicken-sized bird and three related types of grouse.

Interior officials later said U.S. wildlife officials will continue analyzing sage grouse data and make a decision on whether protections are warranted by fall.

Population estimates for greater sage grouse range from 100,000 to 500,000 birds. They occupy 290,000 square miles of habitat in California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, Washington, Wyoming, Alberta and Saskatchewan.

John Freemuth, a public land policy expert and Boise State University professor, said a new firefighting approach that considers the entire ecosystem could work if the various agencies involved aren't overwhelmed by its complexity or end up in turf wars over which one should take the lead on potential changes.

"The key thing here to me is they have to think comprehensively and holistically," Freemuth said. "They have to reach across their agency borders. It is sort of something that if we don't start off down a new path, our problems are going to get worse."