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Amodei lays down gauntlet on sage grouse

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WASHINGTON — Congress is laying down a gauntlet on the [sage grouse](#), [challenging federal land managers](#) to come up with better plans to avoid [listing the desert bird as threatened or endangered](#), Rep. Mark Amodei of Nevada said Thursday.

A year-end spending bill lawmakers were hoping to pass before the weekend places a freeze through September on decisions by the Fish and Wildlife Service on whether to list the sage grouse. A listing would mean blocking off vast tracts in the West to [preserve sage grouse habitat](#), but also could cause deep disruption to ranching, mining and other land uses.

The Obama administration and environmental groups have blasted the legislation.

“The rider demonstrates that House Republicans are more interested in kicking the can down the road than finding solutions to conserve the sagebrush landscape and the Western way of life,” said Jessica Kershaw, a spokeswoman for the Department of Interior.

A department official said the Fish and Wildlife Service will continue to collect data and conduct analysis that would contribute to a final decision. The official also said the delay does not prevent the department from working with states on sage grouse conservation plans.

Amodei, a Republican whose Northern Nevada district has been called a sage grouse crossroads, said the federal government as the largest property owner in the West has not done enough to preserve grouse habitat on land it manages through the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management.

“We have been working the issue on habitat for three years,” Amodei said. “And in working that, these guys at Interior have never asked (Congress) for habitat money, and they own the vast majority of habitat in the West.”

“A one-year delay gets you the ability to get these guys to ask for the money to do their part,” he said. “We have told them specifically that if they are holding all the private

stakeholders to a standard (for habitat preservation) and they are ignoring it themselves, that will get much more attention from us” in Congress.

“The idea is to do the right thing by the resource so it doesn’t get listed,” Amodei said. He said the Obama administration’s approach seems to be to list the sage grouse first, then address habitat preservation.

Amodei was an architect of the provision that effectively postpones a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service decision expected by September. It would prohibit the agency from spending any money in fiscal 2015, which ends Sept. 30, to write or issue any regulations on listings for the species, including the Gunnison sage grouse found in Colorado and Utah and the greater sage grouse that nests in Nevada and nine other states.

Amodei said the delay is relatively short compared to the lengthy time it usually takes to write and finalize federal regulations, and it is specific rather than a broad swipe at the Endangered Species Act.

“Listen, we have taken a small little paring knife, and cut the worm hole out of the apple,” he said. “The apple is still there.”

Amodei, who sits on the House Appropriations Committee, said lawmakers want the Department of Interior to seek funding in its budget early next year to step up rescue efforts. He said he wants to see at least \$25 million in the budget request, and a pledge to seek similar sums in subsequent years as well.

Failing that, he predicted Western lawmakers will seek further delays, of at least five years or more, in decisions whether to list the bird.

Kershaw said the Interior Department “remains optimistic that conservation measures can be implemented to avoid the need to list the greater sage grouse, and the rider will not stop the unprecedented collaboration happening across 11 Western states.

A public lands advocate in Nevada charged Thursday that Congress is attempting to micromanage the sage grouse.

The Amodei sage grouse rider “is a sucker punch to science and conservation on behalf of anti-environmental lobbyists,” said Daniel Patterson, an ecologist with the Center of Biological Diversity.

“The feds need to follow science and the law to save and recover sage grouse,” said Patterson, who is based in Las Vegas.

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