

## Sandoval says feds will honor mineral rights, maps for sage grouse protection

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CARSON CITY — Gov. Brian Sandoval received assurance Friday from Interior Secretary Sally Jewell that the federal government will honor existing mineral rights and use Nevada's updated maps when considering land-use restrictions to protect sage grouse.

Those were two key contentious issues and the focus of a lawsuit filed by Nevada Attorney General Adam Laxalt and nine counties seeking to block amended public lands management plans imposed by the federal government in September as a way to protect the bird's habitat and avoid a listing under the Endangered Species Act.

Sandoval opposed Laxalt's joining the lawsuit and the two Republicans exchanged testy words at the time. Laxalt said the lawsuit was necessary to "fully protect the interest of the state," while Sandoval countered the legal action was premature and would undermine ongoing discussions to try to resolve conflicts with the federal government.

U.S. District Judge Miranda Du heard arguments last month on a motion by critics of the land-use plans to block them from implementation. Among other things they said replacement of a leaky water tank in the tiny town of Baker was put on hold, as were potential sites in Washoe County for a new school and veterans cemetery because of sage grouse restrictions. The judge has not yet ruled.

Sandoval said Jewell's commitment to use Nevada maps takes the Washoe County sites out of sage grouse areas.

"This will allow these projects to proceed under the normal development process," Sandoval said in a statement. Regarding the water tank, he said Jewell agreed to resolve the issue by early next year.

Sandoval, who met with Jewell for more than an hour Friday at the Western Governors Association meeting in Las Vegas, said the federal government also agreed that "all valid existing rights will be exempt from mineral withdrawal and other restrictions" designated for sagebrush focal areas, defined as the critical habitat with high-density sage grouse breeding populations.

In a conference call with reporters, Sandoval called the developments "significant."

"These are significant accomplishments that we've been able to get to in a very short period of time," the governor said.

He said the pending lawsuit "doesn't help the situation" but it won't stall negotiations.

Sandoval and Jewell "both agreed we're not going to let the lawsuit get in the way," the governor said, adding, "If the lawsuit gets in the way, it could take years."

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