



Governor offers a way to save sage grouse and mining



2 HOURS AGO • [THOMAS MITCHELL](#)

Gov. Brian Sandoval is imploring the Interior Department to accept a state-created alternative to its proposed draconian plan to remove millions of acres of federal public land from productive use — specifically mining — as a way of paying lip service to saving greater sage grouse habitat.

In September the federal agency declined to list the bird under the Endangered Species Act and instead issued land use plans that bar mineral exploration and development on nearly 3 million acres within Nevada and restricts grazing and public access on a total of 16 million acres in the state.

On Jan. 15, Sandoval sent a letter to Neil Kornze, director of the Bureau of Land Management, which is a division of Interior and the agency overseeing the bulk of

federal public lands in the state, asking him to accept a state proposal that would essentially swap parcels of land to be protected. Instead of restricting mining on 555,000 acres as the federal land use plan outlines, the state plan would restrict mining on 394,000 acres, but the swap would protect an additional 44 active sage grouse leks, as breeding grounds are called. The swap also could free up as many as 3,700 existing mining claims.

The governor warned in a press release this past week that failure to negotiate in good faith would result in his administration pursuing legal options.

Such a legal option is already being pursued, though the governor has insisted it is premature. The state, nine counties, three mining companies and a ranch have filed suit in federal court to block the land use plan.

A Reno federal judge refused to grant an injunction but a trial could take place this summer.

In his letter, Sandoval argues that the grouse protection restrictions would have serious economic impact on the Nevada economy and jobs.

A single lithium mining project in Humboldt County is estimated to have a direct economic impact of \$2.5 billion over the life of the project and indirect impact of \$3.4

billion, while creating 9,000 person-years of employment and half a billion dollars in salaries. State and local tax revenues are expected to exceed \$100 million.

Lithium is used to make lithium-ion batteries used in electric and hybrid cars. The Tesla Motors/Panasonic battery manufacturing plant near Sparks is expected to consume a huge amount of lithium.

“I believe the proposed land withdrawal will not be able to show any measurable results except for the demise of the mineral exploration industry in Nevada,” Sandoval pointedly states. “The urgency to implement the withdrawal proposal prior to conducting the proper analysis needed to evaluate the efficacy of the action and socio-economic impact of the action is unclear,” adding that the agencies involved have “provided no science or analysis at any level to support the rationale” for excluding mining operations.

As for the threats to sage grouse habitat, Sandoval notes, as he has repeatedly in the past, that wild horse overpopulation, invasive species and huge wildfires that consume hundreds of thousands of acres at a time pose a far more significant danger to the grouse than mining, but little, if anything, is being done about those threats.

Additionally, there is relatively little reliable information on just how threatened the grouse population really is. Sandoval’s letter notes one major grouse habitat region nearly doubled in population during a recent three-year period.

Though Interior Secretary Sally Jewell stated that valid existing mining claims are exempt from any withdrawals, the governor points out that the definition of such valid claims cannot be found in the Federal Register. There is a question as to whether unpatented mining claims — on which millions of dollars in annual fees have been paid but the claims are not yet worked — will be classified as valid existing claims. Sandoval said this needs to be clarified.

In a press release this past week, Sandoval described his proposal as a win-win. “The proposal detailed in the state’s response delivers a ‘win-win’ solution in an effort to achieve the mutual goals of preserving our thriving mining industry, protecting the sage-grouse and enhancing its habitat and maintaining our state’s vast potential for future economic development opportunities. With the correct plan and management Nevada’s mining industry, the sage-grouse, and future economic development can all coexist and flourish in the Silver State,” he wrote.

BLM Nevada spokesman Stephen Clutter told The Associated Press, “We will certainly give serious consideration to these ideas as well as the other scoping comments we have received.”

That would be a change from past behavior.