

Critics say grouse plan ‘baffling mix’ of proposals

[Jeff DeLong, RGJ](#) 2:52 p.m. PST February 6, 2015

The U.S. Forest Service released a plan Friday to help protect habitat used by a variety of sage grouse that exists only along the Nevada-California border, with the strategy coming under immediate fire from one conservation group.

Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest released a final environmental impact statement for a forest plan affecting habitat of the so-called “bi-state” sage grouse, a distinct subspecies of grouse believed to number only about 5,000 birds.

The plan, Forest Supervisor Bill Dunkelberger said, is designed to enhance habitat management measures for the bi-state grouse, also known as the Mono Basin sage grouse. The bird exists only in portions of Douglas, Lyon, Mineral and Esmeralda counties in Nevada and Alpine, Inyo and Mono counties in California.

“This decision includes new forest plan standards and guidelines that will result in the conservation and restoration of bi-state habitat,” Dunkelberger said. “The approved amendment will require the forest to either avoid or mitigate disturbance to habitat from nearly every authorized activity occurring in bi-state sage grouse habitat.”

When that’s not possible, Dunkelberger said, the Forest Service would prepare a site-specific plan that would analyze the impacts of a proposed action and “limit the amount of disturbance to the greatest extent possible.”

The Forest Service’s plan is a “baffling mix” of solid science-based protections in some areas and weak measures when it comes to addressing some industrial development impacting bird habitat, said Erik Molvar, a biologist for the conservationist group WildEarth Guardians. The plan would likely result in a further decline in population of the bi-state grouse, Molvar said.

“With the Mono Basin population teetering on the brink of extinction, we were expecting a sage grouse plan that protects the small and isolated populations that remain in this area,” Molvar said. “Instead, the proposed plan includes a schizophrenic mix of politically driven compromises and science-based standards.”

The plan features positive proposals with regards to livestock grazing but also allows for energy development, mining and tall structures in the midst of sensitive nesting areas, Molvar said.

“On the whole, the proposed plan falls short of what’s necessary to maintain even today’s depressed and fragmented sage grouse populations in the Mono Basin,” Molvar said. “The Forest Service must adopt mandatory standards that protect the bird from every threat it faces if this irreplaceable bird is to have a fighting chance at survival.”

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposed on Oct. 28, 2013 to list the bi-state grouse as threatened under the Endangered Species Act and is scheduled to make a final determination on the bird’s status by April 28. A separate determination on the greater sage grouse, found across much of Northern Nevada and 10 other western states, is due by next September.

A rider attached to an omnibus spending bill in the closing days of the 113th Congress prevents the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service from actually listing the greater or bi-state sage grouse but Department of Interior officials say they still intend to abide by court-ordered deadlines to determine whether listing is warranted or not.

Sage grouse numbers have plummeted across the West due to damage to habitat, with the biggest issues in Nevada being wildfires and invading cheatgrass. Habitat important to the bi-state grouse is also being lost to pinyon-juniper encroaching into sagebrush terrain.