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FEATURED

Feds stall oil, gas leases over sage grouse concerns

By MATTHEW BROWN Associated Press Updated 1 hr ago



BILLINGS, Mont. (AP) — Concerns over a bird that ranges across the American West continue to delay federal oil and gas lease sales, five months after Interior Secretary Sally Jewell proclaimed the Obama administration had found a way to balance drilling and conservation.

The Interior Department said it will defer the sale of almost 60,000 acres of leases that were nominated by companies in eastern Montana as the agency works on new policies for greater sage grouse.

More than 8 million acres of leases previously were deferred in Colorado, Utah, Nevada, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota and Wyoming. It remains unclear when those will be freed up for sales or removed from consideration.

Jewell said in September that Endangered Species Act protections were not needed for the grouse, a chicken-sized bird that inhabits sage brush ecosystems spread across 11 Western states. Grouse numbers declined significantly over the past several decades because of the loss of habitat.

Officials said the decision to forgo protections avoided the need for draconian restrictions on drilling, livestock grazing and other activities that help drive the region's economy.

It followed a sweeping overhaul of federal public land management plans to limit drilling near grouse breeding areas and allowing oil and gas exploration to proceed elsewhere.

The U.S. Bureau of Land Management still is crafting policies to put those plans into effect, agency spokesman Al Nash said. Completion of that work is several months away, he said.

A lawsuit challenging the plans as too weak is pending in U.S. District Court in Idaho. Environmental groups behind the lawsuit contend the land plans are riddled with loopholes that could further drive down the bird's numbers.

Erik Molvar with WildEarth Guardians said the block on new leases over the past several years — coupled with low oil and gas prices — was doing more to protect grouse than any other factor.

But state officials who applauded Jewell's September announcement said there's no

need to delay any longer on those sales.

"Leasing falls short of development," said Tim Baker, natural resources adviser to Montana Gov. Steve Bullock, a Democrat. He added that any concerns could be addressed before drilling occurs, by adding conditions to leases before they are issued.

Montana Petroleum Association executive director Alan Olson said the lease deferrals represent "more excuses" to block development on public lands.

The Bureau of Land Management was moving forward with plans to sell leases on as many as 93 parcels totaling almost 20,100 acres during an Oct. 18 auction. Those are outside sage brush habitat, but had been deferred until the land management plans were completed, Nash said.

"Each respective plan talks at great length about the need for us to address concerns about the habitat," he said. "But the guidance we're going to get goes into detail on how we move forward."

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