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# EDITORIAL: Washington overreach?

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The Obama administration has made a habit of doing end-runs around the law. So it should come as no surprise that the ongoing sage grouse battle in Nevada and the West may also involve putting politics before good policy.

As The Associated Press' Scott Sonner reported last week, rural Nevadans are suing to block the Obama administration's greater sage grouse protection plan. They say a trail of internal government documents shows politics was the driving force behind a pre-determined policy that flies in the face of its experts' own best science.

Mr. Sonner noted that the latest motion filed in federal court seeks to void protections that have severely restricted development of millions of acres of federal land across 10 Western states. Nevada Attorney General Adam Laxalt and lawyers for nine Nevada counties, ranchers and miners say three top Interior Department officials who dubbed themselves the "Grouseketeers" illegally sought input from conservationists outside the planning process.

Interior Secretary Sally Jewell decided in September that the greater sage grouse didn't warrant protection under the Endangered Species Act. However, she instead launched land-use amendments that Mr. Laxalt stated would halt development on nearly 3 million acres "that Nevadans depend on for their economic livelihood." He said federal law requires the government to carefully consider concerns raised by the state and its citizens, "not just special interest environmental groups."

The network of partnerships that staved off the endangered species listing had to take numerous steps to protect the bird's sagebrush habitat and nesting grounds, and will have to implement an even more restrictive plan over the next few years to satisfy federal overseers. So while the protection plan stopped short of an endangered listing that would have been debilitating for Nevada and the West, it still has drawbacks that restrict too much federal land from prudent use.

What's especially galling is that the sage grouse's biggest enemy is arguably the federal government, not the prospect of mining or ranching or, dare we say it, joining the fracking boom. Land mismanagement has contributed to greater wildfire damage, the single greatest threat to sage grouse habitat. Further, there's this Catch-22: Ravens are responsible for about half of all predator-caused losses to sage grouse, but ravens are a federally protected species. In addition, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management can't contain the wild horse population, which tramples the sagebrush.

Granted, it would have been far worse had Secretary Jewell enacted a sage grouse listing. But the lawsuit's allegation of federal government overreach should hardly be a shock at this point. It's another example among many of the federal government having too much domain over land in the West. The solution is to transfer more federal lands to state and local interests, which have far more incentive to take better care of them and to ensure their productive use.