

Sage Grouse could affect control of U.S. Senate

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DENVER – An obscure, chicken-sized bird best known for its mating dance could help determine whether Democrats or Republicans control the U.S. Senate in the November elections.

The federal government is considering listing the greater sage grouse as an endangered species next year. Doing so could limit development, energy exploration, hunting and ranching on the 165 million acres (67 million hectares) of the bird's habitat across 11 Western states.

Apart from the potential economic disruption, the specter of the bird's listing is reviving America's centuries-old debates about local vs. federal control and whether to develop or conserve the region's vast expanses of land.

It has become a key issue in Senate races that are being closely watched because Republicans need to gain six seats in November to capture majority control of the Senate. That scenario would allow the Republicans, who are virtually certain to maintain control of the House, to essentially shut down President Barack Obama's legislative agenda.

Two Republican congressmen running for the U.S. Senate in Montana and Colorado, Steve Daines and Cory Gardner, are co-sponsoring legislation that would prevent the federal government from listing the bird for a decade as long as states try to protect it.

"Montanans want locally driven solutions," Daines said in an interview. "They don't want bureaucrats thousands of miles away in Washington, D.C., dictating what should happen."

Environmentalists and the two Democratic senators being challenged, John Walsh in Montana and Mark Udall in Colorado, oppose the idea. They say they don't want a listing, either, but that the threat of one is needed to push states to protect the bird.

The greater sage grouse is described in the journals of explorers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, who were dispatched in the early 19th century by President Thomas Jefferson to lead an expedition to the Pacific coast. The bird once roamed widely across the massive sagebrush plateaus of the West's interior.

The bird is perhaps best known for its unusual springtime mating dance, during which it puffs its bulbous chest and emits odd warbles. But livestock grazing eroded the bristly plant that the bird depends upon, development chopped up its habitat and energy exploration erected towers that chased it away from its home range.

Three environmental groups sued to force the federal government to protect the bird after the government declined to list it as endangered in 2005. In a 2010 settlement, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service agreed to decide on listing by September 2015.

A major factor will be whether the federal, state and local landowners whose land it inhabits protect the grouse. Many environmental groups say the bird is a stand-in for a vanishing Western ecosystem that needs preserving.

"This is the great landscape of America, when you travel west and see open spaces," said Randi Spivak of the Center for Biological Diversity in Tucson, Arizona, one of the groups that sued to force grouse protection. "And that land has been drilled, subdivided."

Industry groups and state governments worry about the cost.

A study by the Western Energy Alliance, a Denver-based trade organization of independent oil and gas producers, estimates that from 5,000 to 31,000 jobs could be lost should the federal government take steps to protect the grouse.

Kathleen Sgamma, the group's vice president of government and public affairs, said that as the federal government starts to draw up protections, energy leases are being deferred, drilling projects shut down and bureaucratic hurdles raised to any kind of development in the bird's range.

Local officials are alarmed, too.

Udall and other Colorado lawmakers pushed for the Obama administration to delay a decision on a far less prevalent species, the Gunnison sage grouse, until after the November elections. Federal land managers have already declared more than 400,000 acres (160,000 hectares) off-limits to development to protect that bird