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EDITORIAL: Sage-grouse politics

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The fate of a chicken-size bird carries huge economic and political stakes across the West. The sage grouse, long a threat to the thriving energy sector, is also a threat to Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid.

The ground-dwelling bird, which has habitat across Nevada and 10 other states, could be listed as a threatened or endangered species as soon as next year. Such a designation would place burdensome restrictions on the use of tens of millions of acres by ranchers, farmers, and oil and natural gas producers. Environmental organizations that want a halt to ranching and fossil fuel development are too happy to use the sage grouse as the means to achieve their desired end — and political allies in the Interior Department are nearly ready to oblige.

As reported by Nicholas Riccardi of The Associated Press, this expensive game has become a campaign issue this year in U.S. Senate races in Montana and Colorado — contests that could decide whether Democrats retain control of the upper chamber and Sen. Reid keeps his title. Republican challengers understand that a sage grouse listing would cost thousands — maybe tens of thousands — of jobs. Democratic incumbents fear crossing the party's environmentalist base.

This is not an all-or-nothing proposition. It's possible to have economic growth *and* species protection — but not with a federal listing. And a federal listing is no guarantee the sage grouse will be saved — for proof, see the government-sponsored killing of the Devil's Hole pupfish in Nevada.

Sen. Reid would be well-advised to help keep the sage grouse off the protected species list — for the bird's sake and his own.