

# A 'stupid bird'?

Posted: Apr. 13, 2012 | 2:10 a.m.

Environmentalists have identified the ground-dwelling sage grouse as a promising pawn in their drive to force productive users off land through much of the West. A listing of the bird as endangered or threatened could cripple mining, ranching and energy development over vast tracts where the creature is now or once was found -- even areas where it can't be proved indigenous.

Thus, Gov. Brian Sandoval last week re-established Nevada's greater sage grouse advisory committee. The nine-person panel -- whose members have yet to be named -- is charged with recommending an action plan by July 31.

In 2010, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service determined the sage grouse deserved federal protection, but it listed species as commanding higher priorities. A recent legal settlement now gives the agency until 2015 to decide the bird's status -- threatened, endangered or no longer in need of protection.

The late Gov. Kenny Guinn formed Nevada's first such committee in 2000. Gov. Sandoval's spokeswoman, Mary-Sarah Kinner, said last week the new panel will expand on that panel's work. The hope is that by taking state initiative to protect the bird, whose numbers have fallen dramatically in the past century, federal intervention can be avoided.

Concern about the sage grouse already has stalled some energy projects. Last month, the BLM removed 33 parcels amounting to 61,000 acres of public land in Nevada from an oil and gas lease sale because they are within sage grouse habitat. That decision came shortly after BLM deferred ruling on the proposed China Mountain Wind Energy project on the Nevada-Idaho line until the agency completes a study of the potential environmental impact of that project on sage grouse. News of that delay was met with anger in Elko County, where one county commissioner said the prospect of high-paying jobs in the region could be killed by a "stupid bird."

Rep. Mark Amodei, R-Nev., didn't malign the bird, but joined in criticizing the BLM for stalling Nevada's economic recovery. "The sage grouse are not threatened by energy projects or mining operations, which comprise less than 1 percent of Nevada's land area," he said. "Such delays needlessly halt conventional and renewable energy projects that can create jobs and power the growth of Nevada's economy.

Rep. Amodei said wildfires are the biggest threat to the bird. In fact, a Nevada study that placed chicken eggs in mock sage grouse nests had to be ended early when virtually all of the eggs were eaten by ravens or coyotes -- predators that have experienced population explosions as ranchers have increasingly been driven off Nevada lands. Coincidentally, that reduced livestock grazing has allowed a buildup of excessive dry grasses that fuel bigger wildfires.

Here's hoping the governor casts a wide net in searching for committee members with practical knowledge of the bird and its habitat. It is indeed in the state's best interests to protect and restore the sage grouse to whatever extent possible -- but let's make sure we're protecting it only from

factors that actually do it harm, while encouraging land uses and practices that enhance the creature's survival, no matter how counterintuitive.