

Big fire season further threat to sage grouse habitat

1:35 PM, Jul 6, 2012 |

Written by

Jeff DeLong

Prime sage grouse habitat burned this year

Lincoln County: 500 acres

White Pine County: 6,500 acres

Eureka County: 700 acres

Douglas County: 350 acres

Source: Nevada Department of Wildlife

Nevada 2012 wildfires

So far, 265 fires have burned 86,847 acres.

Source: Western Great Basin Coordination Center

[More](#)

If wildfire poses the greatest threat to sage grouse habitat in Nevada, the bird could be in for a tough year.

As the deadline approaches for the federal government to determine whether sage grouse should be listed under the Endangered Species Act at a potentially crippling cost to Nevada's economy, more of its most important habitat is being chewed up by fire.

"Virtually every time we're getting a fire we're getting some impact to sage grouse habitat," said Nevada State Forester Pete Anderson, adding that this summer stands to be particularly problematic.

"If there's ever going to be a season we're going to be challenged, it's going to be this one," Anderson said.

Thus far this year, about 8,000 acres of the most critical sage grouse habitat in Nevada has been lost to fires occurring in White Pine, Eureka, Lincoln and Douglas counties, according to the Nevada Department of Wildlife. The state has about 10 million acres of prime habitat.

Critical sage grouse habitat in Elko County, where the bulk of the state's best habitat is located, has been spared so far in 2012 but much land there has been lost in years

past. And it's still early summer in a year of exceptional fire danger in Nevada and across the West.

"We're just beginning the critical time and, with everything so dry, the fire season could go well into the fall," said Chris Healy, spokesman for the Department of Wildlife. "That's a concern."

On Monday, Anderson briefed a committee established to advise Republican Gov. Brian Sandoval on steps needed to keep the sage grouse from being listed as a threatened or endangered species. The Greater Sage Grouse Advisory Committee is scheduled to provide a set of recommendations to the governor by the end of July.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is scheduled to determine whether the greater sage grouse, found in Nevada and 10 other western states, should be listed in September 2015. The decision comes two years earlier for a distinct population of the bird that lives along the Nevada-California border.

While energy development poses a significant threat to sagebrush habitat needed by the bird in some other western states, experts say the most direct threat in Nevada is destructive wildfire and the spread of invasive vegetation like cheatgrass that typically takes over burn areas.

A number of actions and changes in the way business is done — before, during and after a fire — are needed to help address the situation and preserve the state's sagebrush steppe habitat, Anderson said.

Those actions range from improved fire prevention education campaigns to construction of fuel breaks in sagebrush terrain to slow the spread of a fire. Targeted livestock grazing to reduce fire fuels could become another priority.

Anderson said he aims to reduce the number of fires that grow beyond 300 acres in size and to limit the impact on important sage grouse habitat when fires do get big. To help accomplish the latter, he said fire resources should be prepositioned near key habitat areas at times forecasts call for lightning storms.

The common practice by firefighters to conduct “burn out” operations to remove fuel from an advancing fire should be eliminated in cases where it would mean destroying prime habitat, Anderson said.

“It’s something we just can’t continue to allow to happen” unless public safety is directly threatened, Anderson said.

A dedicated funding source must be established to fund restoration of burned areas, particularly those deemed to have the highest potential for success, Anderson said. Money should come from federal, state and local governments, industry and land users, according to the forester’s recommendations.

Successful restoration will depend to a large degree on having sufficient supplies of native seed available, something that can be particularly challenging during big fire years like this one is shaping up to be.

“Our biggest stumbling block is a large fire season,” Anderson said. “If you can’t get the seed, that’s where you start running into the first big hurdle.”

The price of seed also tends to skyrocket during big fire years, he said.