

# Critics: Nevada wildlife director's ouster could endanger effort to prevent sage grouse listing

Jan 31, 2013 |

The forced resignation of the director of the Nevada Department of Wildlife could endanger efforts to conserve sage grouse and prevent its listing under the Endangered Species Act, conservationists warned Thursday.

A day after Ken Mayer announced he would resign at the request of Gov. Brian Sandoval, critics of the move expressed concern Nevada is doing away with one of its foremost experts on the issue of sage grouse conservation at the worst possible time.

“He’s recognized across the country as one of the top experts on sage grouse,” said Kyle Davis, political and policy director for the Nevada Conservation League. “I don’t think this sends a very good message that Nevada is serious about sage grouse conservation. To me, this was very surprising.”

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is set to determine by September 2015 whether the greater sage grouse should be listed as a threatened or endangered species in Nevada and 10 other western states. Many have said that a listing would come with crippling cost to Nevada’s economy, potentially damaging agriculture, mining, recreation and renewable energy development.

Mayer and his department have played a central role in responding to the issue, in part by mapping more than 9 million acres of the most important sagebrush habitat used by the bird in Nevada. Mayer served as chairman of the National Executive Oversight Committee for Sage Grouse Conservation, chairman of the Bi-state Greater Sage Grouse Executive Committee and held leadership positions with several other similar groups.

Former Nevada Assemblyman John Carpenter on Wednesday accused Mayer of being “in cahoots” with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management over protecting sage grouse. Carpenter, an Elko Republican, said he was among those who lobbied the governor to remove Mayer as NDOW director.

Ted Koch, Nevada director for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, lauded Mayer for his role in improving communication between the state and federal agencies involved in the sage grouse issue. Koch said he remains comfortable with the state's emerging effort to conserve grouse habitat, now headed by the Nevada Department of Conservation and Natural Resources.

"It remains to be seen how NDOW will fit into the mix" moving forward, Koch said.

Others expressed serious concern about the impact of Mayer's ouster, including Tina Nappe, a Reno woman who represented conservation interests on a sage grouse advisory committee formed last year by Sandoval.

Nappe represents the same interests on the newly formed Nevada Sagebrush Ecosystem Council, set to hold its first meeting later this month. That group's mission is to implement conservation strategies to preclude listing of the bird.

In Nappe's opinion, Mayer's removal is "devastating" to that goal and listing of the bird in Nevada is thus all the more likely.

"Firing Ken Mayer, to me, knocks Nevada out of having a valid plan," Nappe said. "All I can do is express concern about the state having any credibility when the governor removes the most important person in the state regarding sage grouse.

"Protection for sage grouse has been moved off the table," Nappe said. "The federal agencies and conservation groups will be taking note of that fact."

Davis said the move raises "serious questions" over Sandoval's commitment to science-based wildlife management in Nevada.