

Critics consider taking a stand on sage grouse

They fear economic hit could be the same with or without concessions

Jan. 12, 2014 |

Written by

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What's next?

WHAT: Sage grouse roundtable discussion

WHEN: 1 p.m. Wednesday

WHERE: Humboldt County Courthouse, 50 West 5th St., Winnemucca

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Some Nevada ranchers and rural politicians say it may make more sense to fight the potential listing of the greater sage grouse under the Endangered Species Act rather than accept proposed changes further eroding rights to use public land.

Central to emerging concerns is draft legislation recently proposed by Nevada's U.S. senators, Democratic Majority Leader Harry Reid and Republican Dean Heller, that critics insist could produce some of the same economic hits that would come with a listing of the grouse as a threatened or endangered species.

"We might be better off to sue over it than us give them these concessions," said state Sen. Pete Goicoechea, R-Elko, who has organized a public meeting Wednesday in Winnemucca to discuss the issue. "We would probably be better off to say go ahead and list us, we'll see you in court."

Wednesday's meeting, described by Goicoechea as a round-table discussion, is "getting quite a response" among rural residents concerned over the draft proposal by Reid and Heller as well as the sage grouse issue in general, the senator said.

The debate comes as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service nears a court-ordered September deadline to decide whether to list the greater sage grouse. In October, the service proposed to list a distinct subspecies of grouse that exists only along the Nevada-California border as threatened.

Many say a listing of the greater sage grouse, found across much of Northern Nevada, would come with crippling cost to ranching, mining, renewable energy development,

recreation and Nevada's economy as a whole. Others insist the bird, which once inhabited vast swathes of sagebrush-covered terrain in the West, needs expanded protection as its habitat is lost to grazing, development and other factors, with widespread wildfires and invading cheatgrass cited by experts as Nevada's biggest problems.

In late December, Reid and Heller released "discussion draft" legislation proposed as a potential means to help avoid the listing of greater sage grouse by raising funds to restore the bird's imperiled sagebrush habitat while stimulating Nevada's economy at the same time.

The Nevada Sagebrush Landscape Conservation and Development Act would raise money for habitat restoration through sale of federal land identified by Nevada counties and through fees assessed on any development allowed in identified sage grouse habitat. Another provision would allow the creation of new wilderness areas on land within so-called "wilderness study areas" and inventoried roadless areas where they overlap with grouse habitat.

While the U.S. senators insist their proposal is largely intended to initiate dialog, it has set off alarm bells among many rural Nevadans, some of whom object to the idea of creating new wilderness in a state with more than 80 percent of its land already in federal ownership, Goicoechea said.

"You mention wilderness in general in Nevada, it's a lightning rod," Goicoechea said. "I don't think it's about the bird. It's about control and money."

Others agree, suggesting it may be time to fight. They say current estimates by the Nevada Department of Wildlife that between 50,000 and 70,000 greater sage grouse exist in Nevada are too low and insist the bird exists in sufficient numbers that its listing would not be legally justifiable.

"There are plenty of birds out there," said Demar Dahl, chairman of Elko County Commission.

Dahl said the Reid-Heller proposal could come with a particularly severe economic hit to Elko County, home to some of Nevada's best grouse habitat. The bill's proposed

conservation fee of \$750 per acre to allow development within priority habitat and \$500 per acre in general habitat is simply too costly, Dahl said.

“That really whacks us,” Dahl said. “That could be really serious for the economy of Elko County.”

Elko County rancher and former Republican Assemblyman John Carpenter said it may make the most sense to fight a listing in court rather than agree to upfront changes further restricting use of Nevada’s range.

“They just take and take and take, and then they’ll probably list the bird anyway,” Carpenter said. “We’re just going to have to take a stand and say we’ve had enough. If they want to list the bird, we’ll take them head-on. We feel it’s time to draw the line in the sand.”

Doing so would probably be the opposite of what really needs to happen, insists Shaaron Netherton of Friends of Nevada Wilderness, a Reno-based conservation organization involved in the sage grouse debate.

“Everybody needs to roll up their sleeve, put aside past prejudices and work together,” she said.

Creation of new wilderness areas in the Reid-Heller proposal would protect about 3 million acres of grouse habitat, Netherton said, adding that “serious, meaningful conservation efforts” are needed across another 10 million acres of Nevada.

Netherton described the Reid-Heller plan as a needed step toward a conservation strategy necessary to prevent a listing of the greater sage grouse she said could come at significant cost to Nevada.

“I think this is the best hope for Nevada,” Netherton said. “I seldom think the courts are the place to resolve natural resource issues.”

Ely rancher Hank Vogler counters that, as far as he’s concerned, the federal government can’t be trusted and that a fight is justified.

“This is all about restricting uses,” Vogler said. “You either get your head cut off with 1,000 paper cuts or you stand up and say no more.”

