

Politics:

Elko County hopes plan prevents sage grouse listing

Officials in a rural northeastern Nevada county have approved a pilot project designed to keep sage grouse off the endangered species list by killing ravens with poisoned eggs and by reducing wildfire threats through livestock grazing.

Elko County commissioners say the program set to begin on the 15,000-acre Devils Gate Ranch is needed because wildfires and ravens pose the biggest threat to the imperiled chicken-sized bird. They say fires destroy sagebrush the birds rely on, while ravens are by far its most common predator.

It's the first such private-local government agreement to stave off a federal listing, commissioners said, and was prompted by concern that listing the large ground-dwelling bird [could result in federal restrictions on grazing, mining, oil and gas drilling and other activities on public land.](#)

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced in 2010 that sage grouse across the West deserved protection under the Endangered Species Act. The agency pledged to make a final listing decision by late 2015.

Sage grouse populations have fallen 90 percent in the past century, and habitat has declined 50 percent.

"We think it's a program that will sweep the West, but we don't think the federal government will support it. They've bought into the claims of environmentalists," Commissioner Grant Gerber said. "We think it's mainly going to be a private initiative and local-county initiative."

Commissioners attribute the bird's decline to dramatic increases in wildfires and ravens. Livestock reduce cheat grass and other fuels on the range that feed fires, they say, and some of the worst fire seasons on record occurred after the government sharply reduced grazing on public lands in recent decades.

"If we don't control the ravens and don't stop the fires, the sage grouse are in real trouble," Gerber said.

The Idaho-based Western Watersheds Project criticized the plan, saying it will destroy sage grouse habitat. The organization has called for the removal of livestock, the closure of two-track roads and a ban on new oil and gas drilling to conserve the bird's habitat.

"Their fixation on killing and poisoning native wildlife and turning lands back into a dustbowl is really twisted," said Katie Fite, the group's biodiversity director. "It's a big distraction from ranchers having to be held accountable for limiting their cattle and sheep herd impacts to sagebrush habitats on public lands."

Ted Koch, state supervisor of the Fish and Wildlife Service in Reno, agreed with the county that wildfires and ravens are factors in the bird's decline.

But his agency views habitat loss and fragmentation as the most serious threat to sage grouse in the West, he said, and considers the spread of invasive species such as cheat grass as its biggest threat in the Great Basin, which covers much of Nevada and Utah and portions of Oregon.

The government blames the increase in wildfires on decades of fire suppression that caused a buildup of fuels, as well as the spread of highly flammable cheat grass.

Cheat grass is replacing sagebrush and other native vegetation that sage grouse rely on. The birds need cover in the form of grasses and forbs under sagebrush for nesting, Koch said, and the county's plan would be less helpful to sage grouse if it results in removal of that cover.

"We welcome their efforts and look forward to their results," he said. "However, our approach is to try to conserve and protect native sagebrush ecosystems. We're not sure about their approach. We're just not sure how effective it will be. But there's a lot we don't know."

Koch also said more needs to be done to reduce ravens, saying Nevada alone has seen a 600 percent increase in the scavengers in the last three decades. The agency supports steps to remove "human subsidies" behind the increase, such as limiting ravens' access to garbage dumps, he added.

Ken Bowler, owner of the Devil's Gate Ranch about 25 miles northeast of Elko, said he's heading into the pilot project with an open mind.

"Let's not jump to the conclusion that it's mining and grazing causing problems for sage grouse," he said. "We want to know what the real deal is."

Nevada Gov. Brian Sandoval's new Sagebrush Ecosystem Council is working with local governments, stakeholders and others across the state to prevent a listing of the bird. "We look forward to continuing to work together on this vital issue," said his spokeswoman Mary-Sarah Kinner.