

Posted November 5, 2013 - 12:22am

EDITORIAL: Environmentalists use sage grouse as pawn

LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL

Pity the poor sage grouse. The bird can't fly, so the creature amounts to fast food for predators such as ravens and coyotes, and it can't outrun raging wildfires. The more the sage grouse population declines across Nevada (the government's contributions to those declines notwithstanding), the greater the chance it will be listed as a threatened or endangered species.

That's something the state wants to avoid at all costs, because heavy-handed restrictions on land use typically accompany such a listing. Washington owns close to 90 percent of the state and makes it maddeningly difficult to put that land to productive use. In the name of saving the ground-dwelling bird's habitat, the government could opt to close off millions of acres to future mining and grazing, oil and gas development, pipelines, transmission lines and renewable energy generation. Already, concern for the sage grouse has limited renewable energy development across tens of thousands of acres.

On Friday, the Bureau of Land Management released its draft management proposals to keep the sage grouse off the threatened or endangered list. Already, some of the options will be tough medicine to swallow. As reported by Sandra Chereb of The Associated Press, the BLM's preferred alternative allows grazing and most oil, gas and geothermal operations, but it would greatly restrict motor vehicle use in some areas, and it would limit or end solar and wind development and mining in some areas.

These potential interventions are especially maddening because they're being pushed by environmentalists and their enablers within the federal bureaucracy. Nevadans are desperate to use rural acreage for job-creating endeavors, but activists who live far away from ranchers and miners — in many cases, far outside the state — have the standing to agitate on behalf of the sage grouse, which live in every Nevada county except Clark.

Their cause is less about saving the sage grouse or increasing its population, estimated at up to 250,000, and more about gaining the land use restrictions that bar development of open spaces. Indeed, Mark Salvo of Defenders of Wildlife told Ms. Chereb the BLM's preferred alternative doesn't go far enough. For these activists, the sage grouse is a but pawn in the campaign to block the projects that lead to increased use of natural resources, improved standards of living and increased energy consumption.

But more federal control of public land hasn't been good for the land or its wildlife. It's not a coincidence that as ranchers and their livestock have been driven off the region's land, the populations of previously hunted predators have increased and vegetation has overgrown to fuel wildfires. People aren't the problem, they're part of the solution.

The BLM is accepting public comments on the sage grouse plans through Jan. 29. Nevadans must counter the absentee environmentalists by advocating local control and use of lands, and actions that protect the sage grouse from the factors that actually cause it harm, not the critically important economic development projects that have a tiny footprint across this wide-open state.

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