

Gov. Sandoval plans to revive state task force

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ELKO — Gov. Brian Sandoval plans the reincarnation of a task force on sage grouse that was in place during the late Gov. Kenny Guinn's administration, according to Sandoval representative Cory Hunt.

Hunt said keeping the sage grouse off the endangered species list is a "priority issue for the state and the governor's office" because a listing would have serious economic impacts on Nevada.

He told the Sage Grouse Symposium audience Saturday night the goal of the task force will be to identify the best practices to preclude a listing.

Details on the task force will come later, Hunt said.

He also said the governor wants the state to have its own plan, not just a federal plan.

Nevada is working with the U.S. Department of Interior, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Western states on efforts to keep the sage grouse off the list, he said at the Elko Convention Center.

"It's important we work together to develop a strategy," Hunt said.

Assemblyman Pete Goicoechea, R-Eureka, said Nevada should handle conservation at the state level because the sage grouse isn't a migratory bird, meaning it falls under state coverage.

He also said the most immediate response to worries about the sage grouse should be to enhance predator control and suspend hunting the bird.

"Bottom line, Nevada resource industries can't afford to have this bird listed," Goicoechea said at the four-hour symposium.

Assemblyman John Ellison, R-Elko, agreed the sage grouse issue should be a state issue, and he said the state could lose billions of dollars if the sage grouse is listed.

He said there would be impacts to oil, gas and wind energy production, hunting, fence building, road construction, mining, ranching and recreation.

Ellison said Nevada's unemployment is 13.4 percent now, but "if we let the sage grouse get listed, it could rise dramatically."

He cited the rise in unemployment in the Northwest when the spotted owl was listed.

Ellison also said the environmentalists pushing for the listing should be held accountable and should pay for litigation.

Assemblyman Ira Hansen, R-Sparks, said that in all the writings of explorers to Nevada, there were only a couple of mentions of sage grouse, indicating the bird was rare. By the 1890s, however, “there was an explosion of sage grouse.”

He said ranchers created meadows, grew alfalfa, grazed livestock and developed water projects that all built up the population. They also did more predator control.

“If we take cattle off, we will lose whatever habitat is left,” Hansen said. His thoughts were echoed by other speakers.

Jack Walther, 93, said he recalled when there were “just thousands” of sage grouse when there were more meadows and more predator controls.

“Instead of putting us in jail for killing a hawk, they’d give us a reward,” he said of federal agencies at the time.

The sage grouse is the center of attention now because the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service put the bird on the candidate list and will conduct a review to decide whether to list it by 2015.

Also, the BLM generated immediate focus because the agency is taking public comments for planned environmental impact statements on conservation of the sage grouse. Those studies will then be used for land-use plans in each BLM district, and the U.S. Forest Service will use the same studies.

Gary Back of Great Basin Ecology said the BLM’s work is more about rules than predators and habitat, so comments should be geared to proposed rules. He said the technical team report the BLM issued with its interim policy on sage grouse conservation is where to look to prepare comments.

“When you see the rules in it you will shudder, and you need to stress that in comments,” Back said.

From his studies, he said growing more sagebrush is important but shouldn’t be the only emphasis because there needs to be nesting habitat that includes shrubs.

“If all we manage for is sagebrush, we will miss the boat,” Back said.

While several speakers said predators are a bigger cause for declining sage grouse numbers than the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service list that puts them 12th on the list, there is predator control now. Mark Jensen, director of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Nevada Wildlife Services, said the agency works with ranchers who have problems with predators.

Joe Bennett of the Nevada Wildlife Services said the agency treated 11 leks in Elko County last year, including treating 3,765 hard-boiled eggs with pesticide to kill ravens. The eggs were marked with a skull and crossbones.

There also is the question of how many sage grouse there are now and what number should be the goal, according to speakers.

Goicoechea cited a number of 168,000 sage grouse as the current estimated population, and he called for better data. Elko County Commissioner Charlie Myers, who talked about whether hunting of the sage grouse should be banned, used the number 141,000.

Leta Collord of the Northeastern Nevada Stewardship Group said Elko County Commission Chairman Jeff Williams has asked the group to come up with estimates.

Quinton Barr of Western Range Service showed graphs that imply that unless the government allows more livestock grazing to improve sage grouse habitat and reduces the extent of wildfires, as well as increases predator control, numbers will decline.

“If the trend continues, it will eventually get to zero,” he said.

Barr’s graph shows an 1800s estimate of 2 million for the sage grouse using Fish and Wildlife data, but he said “we know that is wrong,” based on historic accounts.

Barr said there are 52 times the number of sage grouse than would be the minimum for an endangered species, and there are 120 times the acreage of the minimum habitat.

He said, “If the existing sage grouse population is much greater than the minimum, how did the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service warrant it for listing?”

Matt Zietlow, environmental manager for the Marigold Mine at Valmy and representing the Nevada Mining Association, said the mining industry has been dealing with sage grouse for years now.

The mining association asked the BLM to extend the comment period on the scoping to March 23, he said.

Zietlow said the BLM’s technical team report is “pretty onerous” on locatable minerals, and the industry wants to be sure the BLM doesn’t go with a one-size fits all plan for the 11 Western states.

The industry also wants to see alternatives and mitigation in the plans to conserve the sage grouse, he said.

Zietlow reminded the audience that the National Environmental Policy Act requires the BLM to consider social and economic impacts.

Talking about hunting, Myers concluded that “to hunt or not to hunt is a no-win situation for us.”

Myers said the public perceives that if hunting continues, Nevada isn’t doing its part to keep the bird from the listing. On the other hand, to stop hunting may send the message that counts are down enough to justify the listing.

And if the state says no to hunting the sage grouse, that means hunters would lose their voice at the federal level, Myers said.

Elko attorney Grant Gerber said the Elko County Republican Convention on Saturday approved putting opposition to the listing of the sage grouse in its platform. The convention delegates also approved a resolution against the listing.

Gerber said the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service are to blame for the reduction in sage grouse numbers, and Interior Secretary Ken Salazar could immediately correct the problem by allowing more grazing and more predator control.

He also told the audience the BLM’s interim policy on the sage grouse is “a bad, bad document.”

“There is no excuse for listing the bird and no excuse for the BLM interim policy,” Gerber said.

BLM Elko District Manager Michael Herder said he had “been a little bit uncomfortable at times” during the symposium, but he told the audience the BLM is here and ready to listen.

NDOW also drew fire. Scott Raine, a state wildlife commissioner from Eureka, said NDOW is spending money to study the problem but not taking action.

“It’s one study to the next study to the next study,” he said, citing what he calls “biobabble” and “fact-free science.”

Pat Laughlin of the Nevada Alliance 4 Wildlife said “we’ve got to do something now, folks,” rather than continue studying the sage grouse. His organization is focused on predator control.

Tom Warren of the Elko BLM District presented photographs to illustrate the seeding work the agency has done after major fires in Elko County.

“We’re doing a lot better than people think we are,” he said.