

Grouse protection efforts 'cast aside,' governor says

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Written by

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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service “cast aside” years of work to protect sage grouse habitat along the Nevada-California border with a recent proposal to list a subspecies of the bird as threatened, Nevada Gov. Brian Sandoval said.

And, Sandoval wrote in a letter to Interior Secretary Sally Jewell, that direction could offer worrying insight into the service’s coming decision on whether the greater sage grouse — found across much of Northern Nevada — should also be listed under the Endangered Species Act.

Nevada still has much work to do to convince the service it is taking sufficient measures to conserve some of the most valuable sage grouse habitat in the country, Ren Lohofener, regional director for U.S. Fish and Wildlife, wrote in response to the governor’s letter.

The exchange came as discussions ramp up over the potential listing of the greater sage grouse. That decision, due by next fall, could have widespread affects on ranching, mining, energy development and other key economic drivers for the Silver State.

In late October, the fish and wildlife service announced the so-called bi-state sage grouse, numbering only about 5,000 birds and existing only near the Nevada-California line, is proposed for listing as a threatened species.

In his Nov. 18 letter to Jewell, Sandoval wrote that the proposal left him “deeply disappointed and concerned,” adding that if finalized the listing could “result in gratuitous impediments for Nevada ranchers, renewable energy companies and everyday citizens” using public land.

“It is especially troubling that this listing has been proposed in the face of more than a decade of conservation and restoration initiatives” and in view of the fact the bi-state grouse population has been stable or increasing over the last 12 years, Sandoval wrote.

Since a plan for restoring grouse habitat along the border was approved in 2004, 298 projects designed to improve habitat in both Nevada and California have been pursued, Sandoval said. He cited the establishment of conservation easements on more than 16,000 acres of habitat, acquisition of 7,000 acres and the removal of encroaching pinyon-juniper trees across more than 16,000 acres.

“Unfortunately (Fish and Wildlife) has chosen to case aside these important efforts and meaningful, measurable outcomes, instead opting to propose listing the species,” Sandoval said.

The governor further expressed concern over what this might mean with regard for the coming decision on greater sage grouse, citing “important policy implications” concerning that possibility.

“Many parallels can be drawn between the significant effort and action that has gone into addressing the bi-state (population) and the initiatives also under way for the greater sage grouse,” Sandoval said. “In light of all the work that has been done, this proposed listing puts into question the ... sincerity in promising to work with states and to truly honor our efforts.”

In his Nov. 29 response to the governor, Lohoefener wrote that while he appreciates Nevada’s efforts to conserve sagebrush ecosystems used by sage grouse, “I am concerned that the efforts will not achieve the desired outcome.”

Lohoefener emphasized Nevada’s importance in the big-picture goal to protect grouse habitat across the West, saying the state has more terrain recognized as priority habitat for the bird than any other state.

“The degree to which threats have been ameliorated in Nevada will play a large role” in the decision on the greater sage grouse, Lohoefener said.

Lohoefener said the state must clearly define how its conservation strategy will mesh with federal conservation plans prepared by the Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service and how threats posed by overgrazing will be addressed. He said the state’s plan also currently lacks specific details how it will address threats to habitat posed by wildfire and invading vegetation.

Ted Koch, Nevada director for U.S. Fish and Wildlife, said there is no direct connection between the service's decisions regarding the bi-state population of sage grouse and the greater sage grouse found across 11 western states.

"Given they are both sage grouse and experience similar threats, they are parallel," Koch said. "Procedurally, there is zero nexus — like ants and elephants."