

Private funds being raised for state's sage grouse fight

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SALT LAKE CITY — The consultants awarded a \$2 million state contract to fight against the federal government listing the sage grouse as an endangered species are already raising more money for the battle, lawmakers were told Tuesday.

The money appropriated by the 2014 Legislature won't be available until the new budget year begins July 1, Mike Styler, Department of Natural Resources executive director, told members of the Legislature's Executive Appropriations Committee.

"We have told the contractors there is significant work that needs to be done, but it can't be done with state money," Styler said. "So they're out trying to raise private funds to go ahead and work on this, but we can't pay for anything that they do until after July 1."

Legislative fiscal analyst Ivan Djambov told the committee the contract is a result of concern that Utah's economy would "be impacted negatively to the tune of several billion dollars a year" should the sage grouse be deemed an endangered species.

Stag Consulting won the bid in May for a one-year, \$2 million contract to lobby Congress, develop legal strategies and engage the public in an effort to delay the listing of the sage grouse as an endangered species.

Bountiful lawyer Ryan Benson, who heads the consulting company, was the co-founder of Big Game Forever, a group given a three-year, \$800,000 contract by the state to lobby for taking away endangered species protections for the gray wolf.

Styler told the Deseret News that Utah's price tag for stopping the sage grouse from being listed actually will add up to \$5 million to \$6 million, so the company hired needs private contributions.

"I don't know how much they're able to raise. But I know this is of great interest to oil and gas companies, it's of interest to any folks who might be impacted, extraction companies," Styler said, as well as sporting and grass-roots groups.

Only the state money spent must be accounted for by Stag Consulting, he said, noting money was also from sporting groups and other private sources for the state's gray wolf fight.

"They need to account to us what they've done with state money," Styler said. "If it accomplishes our purposes, we've told them to try and match the state money with as much as they can."

A legislative audit last year found that the group hired on the gray wolf issue commingled private donations with state money, and it was unclear how tax dollars were used.

Styler said the "strongest bidding team" was selected for the sage grouse contract, one that had success in getting the gray wolf off the endangered species list in the Northern Rocky Mountain region.

Now national lobbyists are being brought in as part of the sage grouse contract, he said.

Lawmakers had no questions about the sage grouse contract at Tuesday's meeting. Senate Budget Chairman Lyle Hillyard, R-Logan, said after the meeting he did not know how private contributions would be reported.

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