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Sage grouse plan shows common sense  
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Officials in Elko County have approved a pilot project designed to keep sage grouse off the endangered species list by killing ravens with poisoned eggs and reducing wildfire fuel 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 chicken-size bird.

Ted Koch, state supervisor of the Fish and Wildlife Service in Reno, agrees wildfires and ravens are factors in the bird's decline. He says Nevada alone has seen a 600 percent increase in the scavengers in the past three decades.

Sage grouse populations are estimated to have fallen 90 percent in the past century, even as cattle grazing has been systematically reduced by government regulators under pressure from absentee environmentalists.

It's the first such private-local government agreement designed 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 real goal of many radical environmentalists.

Grazing livestock reduces fuels on the range, commissioners say; some of the worst fire seasons on record occurred after the government sharply reduced grazing on public lands in recent decades.

The Idaho-based Western Watersheds Project, which has actually called for the removal of all livestock, closing roads and a ban on new oil and gas drilling, criticized the plan. "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.

But Ms. Fite is wrong. In fact, wildlife has never prospered as well in the arid West as when ranchers are present to develop water resources and thin out predators.

Both rancher Ken Bowler and the County Commission are to be congratulated for approaching the issue with common sense based on the knowledge and observation of the real stewards of the range — those who have spent their lives there.

The Devils Gate Ranch pilot program is well worth a try.