

# Sage grouse policies ruffle county feathers

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ELKO — The sage grouse is a fairly small bird but efforts to conserve the species to keep it off the endangered species list are a big concern for Elko County Commissioners, who plan to put the sage grouse on all future agendas.

Commissioners are especially concerned about the interim policy the U.S. Bureau of Land Management issued on Dec. 27 for conserving greater sage-grouse habitat while the BLM and U.S. Forest Service amend land-use plans to protect habitat.

“The big issue is it gives too much power to any agency,” Elko County Commission Chairman Jeff Williams said at Wednesday’s meeting. “We need some way to have checks and balances.”

He said the policy doesn’t even mention counties as partners.

Local attorney Grant Gerber said during public comment the BLM put the policy in place without public hearings, and he sees it as a huge threat to recreation, mining, ranching and other uses of public land.

“This is BLM-wide, wherever there is a sagebrush,” he said, referring to the sage grouse’s habitat.

He said a new committee is looking at arranging a hearing on the sage grouse, and he suggested commissioners demand the BLM withdraw the policy. But first, there should be more research, Gerber said.

Commissioners decided to put updates on the sage grouse on the next agenda and subsequent agendas.

Elko County’s natural resource and planning manager, Randy Brown, said later in the meeting after returning from a video conference on sage grouse that BLM State Director Amy Lueders said the interim policy is necessary to keep the sage grouse off the endangered list.

She spoke at a summit the Nevada Department of Wildlife and state and federal partner agencies held Wednesday in Carson City that could be viewed at Great Basin College in Elko.

“Her belief is if we keep doing what we’re doing, the bird will be listed,” Elko BLM District Manager Ken Miller told commissioners after also attending the NDOW summit via the video link.

Miller also said the policy isn’t as threatening as the commissioners may believe.

“I’d suggest the bulk of what is said in the conservation measures really tells us to do what we’re already doing,” Miller said.

He cited as an example the Ruby Pipeline Project. El Paso Corp. had to shut down a small portion of the 680-mile natural gas pipeline project for two to three months because it threatened sage grouse leks, or mating areas.

Miller said the company knew the shutdown would happen if the project wasn’t completed in time, “but it didn’t stop the project.”

Commissioner Demar Dahl said the interim policies “sound like what you would do if the bird is listed,” but Miller disagreed.

“It would be a lot worse,” he said.

Commissioner Glen Gutfry said he had heard from hunters that there are a “ton of sage grouse” on the range, and the hunters said predators kill a lot more of the birds than hunters. The interim policy, however, doesn’t address predator control.

Miller said the BLM doesn’t do predator control but he believes the environmental impact statement that will be developed on conserving and managing the sage grouse should include predator control.

The BLM held an open house earlier this month on the planned environmental impact statement, and that event drew a large crowd because of concerns about the impact on ranching, mining and recreation.

The BLM is taking public comment on the planned EIS until Feb. 7.

The EIS is slated for completion in May 2014, according to the BLM.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service ruled in March 2010 that the listing of the greater sage-grouse under the Endangered Species Act was “warranted but precluded” because of higher priorities, but the sage grouse would be considered again at a later date.