

Sage grouses' fate subject to power grab

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I don't know how many folks have read Gov. Brian Sandoval's sage grouse plan, recently completed and released. I was fearful of what it might entail.

I had no idea it would be as bad as it is.

By all appearances, it should be titled the "Kenneth Mayer Plan" rather than the governor's plan.

It designates the Nevada Department of Wildlife, directed by Kenneth Mayer, as the primary agency for making habitat determinations in consultation with the federal Bureau of Land Management, the U.S. Forest Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

It calls for the establishment of a "regulatory process" for the management of all occupied, suitable and potential habitat for the ground-dwelling bird.

It calls for the creation of an advisory council, which will mirror the makeup of the Governor's Sage Grouse Advisory Committee, whose responsibility will be to resolve conflicts between industry, land owners and resource managers.

It calls for the establishment of a sage grouse mitigation program - similar to what was established in Southern Nevada for the desert tortoise, whereby those altering landscapes will be allowed to proceed only when certain amounts of money are paid into a fund that is to be used for sage grouse enhancement projects.

It calls for the creation of a "technical team" - using the Tahoe Conservation Team as a model - with the responsibility of providing consultation for those wanting to conduct activities in occupied or potential sage grouse habitats.

It's hard to believe that persons calling themselves Americans would be advocating a program of this nature. Clearly, the plan is designed not to help sage grouse, the environment or anything else. It is designed to advance the goals of those in government. It's a power grab of the worst kind.

So what is the solution? What can be done to stop its implementation?

First, concerned citizens must demand a study to determine sage grouse status and production on private land owned by the Sorensen family near Secret Valley, as compared to that on lands now owned and controlled by the Bureau of Land Management, midway up the Mary's River drainage, which have not been grazed for more than 15 years. If this is done, perhaps it will reveal the truth regarding the issue at hand: Is it those working within the private sector whose management

practices are hurting sage grouse, or is it those working within the various government resource management agencies?

Second, concerned citizens must demand a large study area be set aside here in Nevada where livestock grazing and predator control practices similar to those of the 1940s, '50s and '60s be conducted for a period of 20 or more years for the purpose of determining the true effects of grazing and predator control practices on sage grouse, mule deer and other wildlife.

Third, concerned citizens must demand a study be completed to determine the amounts of yearly production and nutritional value of black sage growth or regrowth on plants that are grazed by domestic sheep on a regular basis, as compared to black sage plants that are left ungrazed from year to year.

If winter ranges that are grazed routinely produce a much higher percentage of highly nutritious feeds each year than ranges that are ungrazed from year to year, it may offer an explanation for why sage grouse did so well when great numbers of domestic sheep were being grazed.

It now appears that actions of the past have been based on false assumptions. If such is the case, new policy needs to be formulated mirroring those practices that were in place during the first half of the 1900s.

Fourth, concerned citizens must demand that the practices for any new sage grouse preservation plan first be implemented and carried out on the Ruby Lake National Wildlife Refuge, the Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge and Hart Mountain Wildlife Refuge so their effectiveness can be determined. Should such practices work on refuge lands, then and only then should they be implemented on other lands throughout the West.

Should officials working within the various agencies refuse these challenges, we can only assume their intentions are of the worst kind. In such a case, we must seek other solutions, such as demanding that the Nevada Department of Wildlife be abolished in favor of reinstating the old Fish and Game Department of yesteryear, whereby a statewide board of commissioners, one from each county, elected by the people of each county, are given the ultimate say over the management of Nevada's wildlife.

A second thing to consider would be the passage of legislation enabling Nevada to reclaim its public lands, as Utah has done.

Such steps may take time. There may be a battle. But with a sinking economy, the loss of business opportunity and activity, ever-increasing overregulation and the national debt being what it is, what more important steps could be taken in the months and years ahead?

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