

# Wildlife board member, biologists disagree on sage grouse hunting ban

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RENO -- The Nevada Wildlife Commission is being asked to ban hunting for sage grouse statewide as a way to keep the bird off the federal list of threatened and endangered species, while state biologists say hunting has little impact on its population.

Commissioner Henry Vogler said he intends to press for the closure of the hunting season during the panel's meeting today and Saturday in Fallon. The Ely rancher said if the federal government grants the bird protection under the Endangered Species Act, it could result in dramatic restrictions on livestock grazing and mining.

"We have to do something that shows we are on top of our game," Vogler said. "I want the discussion to be done, and I want it done now, not two years from now."

State biologists say wildfires and development pose much greater threats to sage grouse than hunting, which is not allowed in prime habitat areas.

"Hunting as a factor is pretty low on the totem pole," said Shawn Espinosa, a game specialist with the Nevada Department of Wildlife. "Whether or not we're hunting the bird is not going to make much of a difference in whether U.S. Fish and Wildlife decides to list this species."

This year's season for sage grouse is scheduled for Sept. 25 to Oct. 9.

Last year, 8,944 grouse were bagged by Nevada hunters. Between 3,000 and 5,000 were taken in each of the previous four years.

Washington state ended hunting for sage grouse 20 years ago, but that has not resulted in the bird's population growing there, Espinosa said.

Wyoming and Utah are among other states that allow sage grouse hunting. It is allowed in parts of Colorado and Idaho, but a Forest Service expert in Idaho suggested this week that the state temporarily suspend hunting.

In March 2010, U.S. Fish and Wildlife officials declared listing for the greater sage grouse is "warranted but precluded" across its range of 11 Western states. That means federal scientists think listing would be justified, but other species in trouble have a higher priority.

The population of the chicken-sized bird has declined for decades, and it occupies only about half of its original year-round habitat, experts said.

Vogler, ranching's representative on the wildlife panel, sees a threat posed by a possible listing to Nevada's agricultural and mining industries.

"The sage hen is going to be our spotted owl," Vogler said, comparing the situation to the issue that affected the timber industry in the Pacific Northwest.

Doing away with grouse hunting might send a needed signal that Nevada is taking steps to protect the bird and that federal intervention is unnecessary, Vogler said.

"If we're killing 9,000 of them a year, wouldn't that be 9,000 more of them? That's 9,000 more reasons they shouldn't be on the Endangered Species List," he said. "We don't need the federal government to tell us how to do this."

Espinosa said Nevada is taking steps to protect the bird, including limiting the hunting harvest to no more than 10 percent of the bird's peak fall population.

Since 2001, the Nevada Department of Wildlife has implemented 27 sage grouse habitat improvement projects, with 71,348 acres treated at a cost of \$2.3 million, officials said.

Espinosa said doing away with the hunting season also would do away with a valuable tool for collecting information on sage grouse. Wings are turned in by hunters and provide data on bird numbers, gender and nesting activity