

Interior: Grouse listing warranted but precluded

March 5 2010, By MEAD GRUVER , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- The Interior Department announced Friday that it won't list sage grouse as endangered or threatened but will classify the bird among species that are candidates for federal protection.

The finding is good news for the wind energy and oil and gas industries, which will still face scrutiny in grouse habitat but will have more leeway than if the bird were listed.

Interior Secretary Ken Salazar said in a news release that listing is warranted but precluded by higher priorities - other species that are in greater danger.

The finding validates years of effort by some Western states to map the birds' sagebrush habitat and take other steps to prevent a sage grouse listing.

A chicken-sized, brown bird, sage grouse inhabit about half of their historical range. The bird inhabits large portions of Wyoming, Nevada, Montana, Oregon and Idaho, and smaller areas of Colorado, Utah, California, Washington, South Dakota, North Dakota and western [Canada](#).

Especially in Wyoming, large areas of sage grouse habitat also are prime spots for natural gas development that has boomed in recent years. In Nevada, the birds are challenged by an [invasive species](#), cheatgrass, which is prone to frequent wildfires that burn up native sagebrush.

"The sage grouse's decline reflects the extent to which open land in the West has been developed in the last century," Salazar said in a release. "This development has provided important benefits, but we must find common sense ways of protecting, restoring, and reconnecting the Western lands that are most important to the species' survival."

Voluntary conservation combined with federal funding and technical help can help those efforts, he said.

The sage grouse finding results from a lawsuit filed in 2006 by an Idaho group, Western Watersheds Project. A [federal judge](#) in Boise, Idaho, ruled in 2007 that political pressure tainted an earlier decision not to list the sage grouse.

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