

Protections blocked, but sage grouse work goes on

December 17 2014, byMatthew Brown



This April 2014 photo provided by Colorado Parks and Wildlife shows a Gunnison sage grouse with tail feathers fanned near Gunnison, Colo. U.S. officials say they will decide next year whether the wide-ranging Western bird species needs protections even though Congress has blocked such protections from going into effect. That means wildlife officials could determine the greater sage grouse is heading toward possible extinction, but they would be unable to intervene under the Endangered Species Act. (AP Photo/Colorado Parks and Wildlife, Dave Showalter, File)

(AP)—U.S. wildlife officials will decide next year whether a wide-ranging Western bird species needs protections even though Congress has blocked such protections from taking effect, Interior Secretary Sally Jewell said Wednesday.

They could determine the greater sage grouse is heading toward possible extinction, but they would be unable to intervene under the Endangered Species Act. The bird's fate instead remains largely in the hands of the 11 individual states where they are found.

President Barack Obama signed a \$1.1 trillion spending bill late Tuesday with a provision that barred money from being spent on rules to protect the chicken-sized bird and three related types of grouse.

Jewell said the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will continue collecting and analyzing data on sage grouse. A decision on whether protections are warranted will be reached by the end of the fiscal year on Sept. 30, Interior officials said.

Greater sage grouse range across 11 Western states and two Canadian provinces. Oil and gas drilling, wildfires, livestock grazing and other activities have consumed more than half the bird's habitat over the past century.

The spending bill provision on sage grouse came after Western lawmakers and representatives of the oil and gas and agriculture industries said a threatened or endangered listing would devastate the region's economy.

Jewell criticized what she called "political posturing" in Congress over the issue. She said the spending prohibition would "undermine the unprecedented progress that is happening" as states and federal agencies craft sage grouse conservation plans.

Population estimates for greater sage grouse range from 100,000 to 500,000 birds. They occupy 290,000 square miles of habitat in California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, Washington, Wyoming, Alberta and Saskatchewan.

Worries about a potential endangered species listing for sage grouse already prompted the deferral of sales on more than 8 million acres of potential federal oil and gas leases. Those parcels can be put up for sale once conservation plans for sage grouse are in place, which is expected sometime next year. The plans are separate from any endangered species protections.

Wyoming and Montana account for 55 percent of the birds' population. Officials from the two states and others have pushed to keep greater sage grouse off the federal protected species list so they can retain control over the bird and its habitat.

A spokesman for Montana Gov. Steve Bullock, a Democrat, said collaborative efforts to conserve the bird would continue. Spokesman Dave Parker said the spending bill provision was "really not delaying the work we need to do, to ensure Montana can protect the sage grouse."

Wildlife advocates remained wary.

"Now we're going to get our chance to see if the state, local and federal agencies can deliver on sage grouse protections in the absence of an Endangered Species Act listing," said Erik Molvar with WildEarth Guardians.

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