

\$4 million in US projects aim to protect sage grouse habitat

April 29 2015, by Keith Ridler

Interior Secretary Sally Jewell on Wednesday announced more than \$4 million in projects in four states as part of a wildfire-fighting strategy to protect a wide swath of intermountain West sagebrush country that supports cattle ranching and is home to a struggling bird species.

The U.S. Bureau of Land Management will use the money in Idaho, Utah, Nevada and Oregon to counter wildfire threats, invasive grasses and flammable juniper trees encroaching in native sagebrush habitat.

"These projects will not only improve rangeland health, but also help mitigate the risks to local economies that depend on healthy lands," Jewell said in a statement.

The projects follow Jewell's order in January calling for a "science based" strategy that safeguards the greater [sage grouse](#) while contending with wildfires that have grown larger over the years and have been especially destructive in the Great Basin region.

The wide-ranging bird found in 11 states is under consideration for federal protection, and another giant habitat-consuming fire could factor into the decision. Just the potential listing has put on hold development of wind farms and oil and gas drilling plans in some areas. Experts say an endangered-species listing could damage Western states' economies.

Though Congress voted last year to withhold funding to list the sage grouse as threatened or endangered, protections could complicate energy

development.

The \$4 million in projects could help sway decision-makers.

"I think a lot of people were hoping to see something like this," said John Freemuth, a Boise State University professor and public lands expert, noting that the collaborative efforts by ranchers, environmentalists and state and federal officials to protect sage grouse habitat.

"It's a reward," he said. "You're seeing the Interior Department saying here is a bigger commitment we can make that will further the bigger effort so that there won't be a listing of greater sage grouse."

Idaho will receive \$1.78 million to be used to create fuel breaks along transportation corridors in the southwest part of the state that will help firefighters halt wildfires.

The \$1.03 million for Oregon will be used for prescribed fires to take out juniper stands, mechanical thinning of juniper stands and planting [native grasses](#). Juniper trees soak up the limited amount of water other plants depend on.

Utah will receive \$811,000 for projects that include removing juniper stands and seeding with native plants and grasses.

Nevada will get \$638,000 for projects that include mowing along roadways to reduce fire potential, seeding native plants and preventing the spread of cheatgrass, an [invasive species](#) that increases risks for fires.

"The BLM is targeting our existing resources to address the biggest threats to the West's most productive sage grouse habitat," agency Director Neil Kornze said in a statement. "By strategically focusing our fire prevention and restoration efforts, we are laying the foundation for

long-term conservation of the healthy rangelands that help define and sustain the West and its people."

Jewell said in March that the strategy for this year's wildfire season would prioritize the protection of sage grouse habitat during any blazes.

"We're concerned because there's potential to have an above-normal fire season in the Great Basin, especially since we've been in drought these last couple of years," said Jessica Gardetto, a BLM spokeswoman at the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise. The center is tasked with deploying resources once the fire season kicks in.

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