

Western governors tout sage grouse conservation efforts

April 2 2015, by Keith Ridler



In this March 25, 2007 file photo, two sage grouse roosters challenge each other for hens in Rockland, Idaho. The Western Governors' Association has released a report on voluntary efforts in 11 states to conserve sage grouse habitat as part of an effort to avoid a federal listing of the bird under the Endangered Species Act. (AP Photo/The Idaho State Journal, Bill Schaefer, File)

A group of Western-state governors has released a report on voluntary efforts in 11 states to conserve the habitat of sage grouse as part of an effort to avoid a federal listing of the bird under the federal Endangered Species Act.

The 32-page "2014 Sage-Grouse Inventory" released Thursday by the Western Governors' Association identifies [conservation work](#) during the year and is accompanied by a 101-page appendix listing efforts since 2011.

"The states have certainly done all that has been asked of them and all that can be done to prove to the federal government that a listing is unnecessary," said Idaho Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter, who has proposed ideas for protecting habitat that have been incorporated by federal planners.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has a Sept. 30 deadline to decide whether to propose the greater [sage grouse](#) as needing protections that could limit ranching as well as oil and gas drilling in the West. The Western Governors' Association said a listing will reduce voluntary conservation work and harm states' economies.

The chicken-sized bird once numbered in the millions, but current estimates put the population between 200,000 and 500,000. Experts blame loss of habitat. They attribute that loss to development and, in the last decade, massive wildfires blamed on a warming climate and invasive species, namely fire-prone cheatgrass that has transformed large areas into monocultures unsuitable for sage grouse.

"It's a good report," said John Freemuth, a Boise State University professor and [public lands](#) expert who analyzed the documents. "What they're trying to do is show—primarily Fish and Wildlife—that all these efforts are being done to protect sage grouse habitat."

Some highlights in the report include Montana Gov. Steve Bullock's executive order creating a statewide greater sage-grouse habitat conservation program and requiring compliance by state agencies. In Nevada, the report said, the state's Sagebrush Ecosystem Council adopted a plan in 2014 building on the recommendations made by the state's Greater Sage-Grouse Advisory Committee.

The report noted that the Colorado Cattleman's Agricultural Land Trust holds conservation easements on more than 45,000 acres of sage grouse

habitat. In November, though, Fish and Wildlife listed another type of sage grouse, the Gunnison, in Colorado as threatened. The state responded by suing Fish and Wildlife.

Federal officials are also trying to avoid a listing. Interior Secretary Sally Jewell in January issued an order seeking a science-based approach to find a way to stop wildfire and other threats to protect sage grouse habitat.

The first part of the plan released in March calls for prioritizing and protecting sage-grouse habitat most at risk by using veteran crews, rural fire departments and fire protection associations made up of ranchers who can respond quickly.

The association's report said various agencies have also been working with private citizens to protect habitat through easements. Though too recent to be in the report, Jewell last week visited central Oregon to celebrate agreements with ranchers intended to protect sage grouse habitat.

Travis Bruner of the Idaho-based Western Watersheds Project, a conservation group, said voluntary measures on private land fall short because they lack scientific monitoring. He also said that could cause federal authorities to do less on public lands that contain most of the sage grouse habitat. If Fish and Wildlife had to make a decision today, he said, sage grouse should be listed.

"We haven't seen any kind of stringent regulations implemented to protect their [habitat](#)," Bruner said.

Freemuth said the association's documents could be enough to persuade the federal agency to decline a listing. "The sense is that Fish and Wildlife—they don't want to list either—but they need to be given

enough evidence that they feel comfortable with that," he said.

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