

Sage grouse conservation changes draw mix of praise, alarm

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In this April 20, 2013 file photo, male greater sage grouse perform mating rituals for a female grouse, not pictured, on a lake outside Walden, Colo. President Donald Trump's administration has opened the door to industry-friendly changes to a sweeping plan imposed by his predecessor to protect a ground-dwelling bird across vast areas of the West. Wildlife advocates warn that the proposed changes would undercut a hard-won struggle to protect the greater sage grouse. (AP Photo/David Zalubowski, File)

President Donald Trump's administration has opened the door to

industry-friendly changes to a sweeping plan imposed by his predecessor to protect a ground-dwelling bird across vast areas of the U.S. West.

Wildlife advocates warned that the proposed changes would undercut a hard-won struggle to protect the greater sage grouse.

Representatives of the ranching and energy industries cheered the policy shift as needed to give states flexibility.

The recommended changes released Monday by Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke recognized for the first time the importance of livestock grazing on sage grouse habitat, said Jim Magagna, executive vice president of the Wyoming Stock Growers Association.

It also backed away from requirements to keep rangeland grasses and shrubs at a prescribed minimum height, which ranchers had complained was arbitrary.

"I was very pleased with what I saw there in terms of the tone," Magagna said.

Millions of sage grouse once populated the American West, but development, livestock grazing and an invasive grass that encourages wildfires has reduced the bird's population to fewer than 500,000.

The conservation plan that was years in the making affects 11 states, and just how much Zinke intends to tinker with it remains to be seen.

It was hashed out under President Barack Obama and unveiled in 2015 as a solution to keeping the bird off the endangered species list following a decadelong population decline caused by disease and pressure on habitat from energy development, grazing and wildfires.

The proposed changes, the result of a 60-day review by Zinke's agency, could give states wiggle room in areas such as setting population goals and drawing boundaries of recognized habitat.

Advocacy groups such as The Wilderness Society and National Wildlife Federation said the proposal was a backdoor attempt to allow unfettered oil and gas development that ignored previous scientific studies showing that drilling too close to breeding areas would harm the birds.

"Wholesale changes to the plans are not necessary and could derail years of hard work," federation President Collin O'Mara said in a statement. "We cannot fall victim to the false dichotomy that pits wildlife conservation against the administration's energy development goals."

The birds inhabit large swaths of Wyoming, Utah, Idaho and Nevada—big ranching states that include areas with vast wind energy and gas drilling potential.

Wyoming has a larger number of greater sage grouse than any other state and keeping the bird off the endangered list is a priority, Wyoming Gov. Matt Mead said.



In this July 25, 2005 file photo, a sage grouse is seen near Fallon, Nev. Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke says a new federal plan to protect the threatened sage grouse will better align with conservation efforts in 11 Western states where the bird lives. (AP Photo/Cathleen Allison, File)

"We've come a long ways to get to this point," Mead said. "As we make changes—and certainly I think there's room for improvement—we have to move cautiously because we don't want to get to the point where the bird is listed."

Wyoming officials are concerned by how the administration wants to set population goals for sage grouse. The birds are difficult to count and their numbers can fluctuate significantly in response to weather patterns, Mead said.

If revisions to the conservation plan are not sufficient to protect the bird,

the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service could list it as a threatened or endangered species, which could trigger new restrictions on the livestock and energy industries, Montana officials said.

"The Department of Interior's efforts to provide states greater flexibility could imperil the overall effort to prevent a listing," Montana Gov. Steve Bullock, a Democrat, said in a statement Tuesday.

Idaho Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter said Zinke's announcement marked an appropriate step toward giving the state more power to manage sage grouse. Idaho, along with Utah and Nevada, had sued to challenge the Obama-era conservation plans.

The proposed changes drew a muted reaction from some other Western governors who had been heavily involved in crafting the plan.

Democratic Gov. John Hickenlooper of Colorado, who co-chaired a federal-state sage grouse task force established in 2011, was still reviewing Zinke's announcement, according to spokeswoman Jacque Montgomery.

In Nevada, Republican Gov. Brian Sandoval didn't have any immediate comment. Sandoval had worked closely with former Interior Secretary Sally Jewell to develop protection plans for the state.

Sandoval, Hickenlooper and Wyoming's Mead met with Zinke in April and urged him to coordinate with the states before changing the plans.

Areas where sage grouse live and gas drilling overlap include the upper Green River Basin of western Wyoming, home of some of the nation's biggest onshore natural gas fields.

A third gas field could add an additional 3,500 wells in a 220-square-

mile area. Drilling could begin next year if federal land officials sign off.

Jonah Energy LLC, recognizes that sage grouse spend winters in part of its proposed gas field about 200 miles (322 kilometers) northeast of Salt Lake City, said Paul Ulrich of the Denver-based petroleum company.

"From our perspective, that definitely presents challenges but also provides an opportunity to do what we've done from day one, which is follow the science," he said.

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