

Forest Service weighs changes to protections for sage grouse

November 22 2017, by Keith Ridler

The U.S. Forest Service is rethinking protection plans for sage grouse in six Western states after a U.S. court agreed with mining companies and others that the agency illegally created some safeguards in Nevada.

The agency announced Tuesday that it's working with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, which also is reviewing its plans for the struggling bird following an order by Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke.

Forest Service spokesman John Shivik said the coordinated review makes sense two years after federal officials decided the chicken-sized bird shouldn't receive endangered-species protections.

"Now is a good time to say, 'How well is this working,'" he said Wednesday.

The agency is taking public comments in Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Utah, Colorado and Wyoming through Jan. 5. It says it will review the input before deciding if changes are needed. It's not clear when the agency will make a decision.

The government in 2015 didn't list [sage grouse](#) but imposed restrictions on land use that were based on multiple plans put forward by the Forest Service and BLM. Many of those plans include sagebrush focal areas that created additional restrictions in places considered key sage grouse habitat.

The federal court in Nevada in March ruled that the Forest Service's creation of the focal areas in a part of that state violated federal environmental laws because the agency failed to give the public enough information to participate in a meaningful way before creating them.

The focal areas added late in the process in 2015 are found in many states and generally considered one of the reasons sage grouse didn't receive federal protection.

Focal areas were "a last-minute surprise to a lot of people, and that created a lot of ill will," said John Freemuth, a Boise State University environmental policy professor and public lands expert. "Whether not doing them would have avoided a sage grouse listing is pure speculation."

Idaho Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter has complained bitterly about the focal areas and filed a lawsuit shortly after the 2015 federal plan came out, contending the Obama administration acted illegally by imposing federal land-use restrictions. A federal judge dismissed the lawsuit in January, but Otter in March appealed to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia. That case remains active.

Because the focal areas are in multiple states, Shivik said, the Forest Service decided to also review its plans outside of Nevada and look at more than just focal [areas](#). Other topics the agency is taking public comments on include grazing guidelines, modifying habitat boundaries and land-use exemptions.

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

Most of the bird's habitat—sagebrush steppe—is on land administered

by the BLM. Shivik said the Forest Service manages about 8 percent of sage grouse habitat.

© 2017 The Associated Press. All rights reserved.

Citation: Forest Service weighs changes to protections for sage grouse (2017, November 22)
retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-11-forest-sage-grouse.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.