

Grouse may rival owl's economic effect

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Whether to declare the sage grouse an endangered species has pit environmentalists against ranchers in the northwestern United States.

On one side are ranchers, supported by many politicians, who want to help the bird prosper in its natural habitat. On the other side are environmentalists who want the federal government to step in and declare the sage grouse an endangered species so it can prosper in its natural habitat.

The sticky part is that natural habitat. If the grouse is declared an endangered species then the use by ranchers and others of its natural habitat, which ranges from North Dakota to northern California, is severely limited. The economic impact, said The Washington Times, would be more severe than that suffered by the timber industry when the spotted owl was put on the endangered species list.

Since about 75 percent of Wyoming is natural habitat for the sage grouse Wyoming Gov. Dave Freudenthal has brought ranchers and environmentalist together to try reach a solution.

A group of environmentalists is trying to overturn a 2005 decision against putting the grouse on the list, arguing that political favors played a role in that decision and that the spread of fatal bird diseases like West Nile virus and oil exploration in the area are reasons to protect the grouse federally, the Times said.

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