

Q&A: What is a sage grouse and why is the bird imperiled?

September 22 2015, by Mead Gruver



In this May 9, 2008 file photo, male sage grouse fight for the attention of a female, southwest of Rawlins, Wyo. The ground-dwelling bird, whose vast range spans 11 Western states, does not need federal protections, the Interior Department said Tuesday, following a costly effort to reverse the species' decline without reshaping the region's economy. (Jerret Raffety, Rawlins Daily Times via AP, File)

The Interior Department said Tuesday it won't propose federal protections for the greater sage grouse, a chicken-sized bird of the sagebrush that ranges from California to the Dakotas.

The implications of the announcement were huge for oil and gas drilling, renewable energy development and cattle grazing: The bird ranges across all or part of 11 states, and [federal protections](#) could have placed new restrictions on those industries.

Here are some questions and answers about the [sage grouse](#):

WHAT IS A SAGE GROUSE?

Mottled brown and easily overlooked in their native setting as a rock or a piece of wood, the sage grouse is not much to look at until spring breeding season. That's when the males puff their chests and flare their feathers in courtship displays at special areas called leks.

The greater sage grouse flies but not well, sometimes killing themselves by flying into barbed-wire fences.

They're also shy, and they keep clear of tall objects—cliffs, trees, transmission towers and windmills—that offer a handy perch for raptors.

In spring, they eat insects and small flowering plants, switching to sagebrush in fall. Mostly they keep hunkered down and out of sight amid the pungent-smelling, olive-green shrubs for which they're named.

WHAT IS THE BIG DEAL?

Sage grouse once numbered in the millions. They're down to several hundred thousand now with the incursion of oil and [gas drilling](#), homes, roads and other trappings of human civilization into their habitat, the vast "sagebrush sea" in the lower open country of the West.

No state has more sage grouse or more at stake than Wyoming, home to as many as half a million of the birds and the region's biggest coal, natural gas and uranium mining industries.

In the Great Basin states of Nevada, western Utah and small portions of Idaho, Oregon and California, an invasive species called cheatgrass has run rampant in the sagebrush. Cheatgrass burns hotter and is more susceptible to wildfire than sagebrush—and fires in cheatgrass-infested sagebrush are burning up sage grouse habitat at an alarming rate.

Some environmentalists say only tight restrictions on development and grazing can save the sage grouse. Others, including the petroleum industry, say cooperation between government and the private sector can help the bird while not wreaking economic havoc.

WHAT'S BEEN DONE ALREADY?

Wyoming officials began preparing for the possibility of federal protection for the sage grouse more than a decade ago. The state was first to designate sage grouse core habitat where development would face certain restrictions, an approach copied by other states and Interior itself.

The U.S. Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service have approved new policies for sage grouse in 10 of the 11 sage-grouse states. They include spacing out oil and gas wells and prohibiting drilling during sage grouse mating season. Interior officials describe these changes as

the biggest land-planning effort the government has undertaken for a single species.

WHAT HAS CONGRESS DONE?

Last year, Congress approved a budget provision that prohibits the U.S. Fish and Wildlife service from spending any money on putting into place any listing of the greater sage grouse as threatened or endangered. Such "budget riders" typically remain in effect until they're overturned—unlikely while a Republican majority remains in place. Republicans have pointed to the sage grouse issue as an example of potential government overreach.

WHAT ABOUT THE OTHER SAGE GROUSE?

Last year, Fish and Wildlife decided to list the Gunnison sage grouse of Colorado and Utah as a threatened species, a decision being challenged by Colorado.

Precedent exists for deciding that enough has been done to warrant keeping sage grouse off the endangered or threatened list. In April, Fish and Wildlife decided against listing the Mono Basin sage grouse, a genetically distinct population of the greater sage grouse that lives along the Nevada-California line.

Of the three, the greater sage grouse is by far the most numerous and widespread.

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