



Salazar says sage grouse deserves federal endangered species protection but will have to wait

By Matthew Preusch, The Oregonian

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Steven Nehl/The Oregonian

A male Greater sage grouse puts on a display near Burns during mating season in 2004.

The Greater sage grouse deserves to be added to the federal list of threatened and endangered species — but won't be because of a backlog of imperiled species, the Obama administration announced Friday.

The Interior Department decision means the bird, found in the open spaces of southeast Oregon,

will get increased attention and conservation funding. But there won't be strict limits on energy development such as wind farms.

Interior Secretary Ken Salazar said the sage grouse's numbers are down about 90 percent from when Lewis and Clark first noted the showy chicken-size bird on their journey west two centuries ago.

Still, it now sits in the bottom half of a list of more than 250 species awaiting protection under the Endangered Species Act. The bird is a cornerstone species of the sagebrush sea that covers part of Oregon and 10 other Western states.

The "warranted but precluded" decision means the bird deserves protection under federal law but other priorities prevent the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service from adding it to the list of threatened and endangered species at this time.

Increased federal protection for the bird could mean stricter controls on energy development, grazing and other activities that might push the bird closer to extinction.



Friday's decision means the government will pay closer attention to and better fund conservation efforts to preserve the sage grouse and its habitat, but it is likely welcome news from wind developers and others whose interests could run counter to the bird's.

"We need to find smart ways to protect habitat, but also allowing for much needed development of energy resources," Salazar said Friday.

The service will review the grouse's status every year. Though many populations of the bird could disappear in coming decades, the bird isn't at risk of imminent extinction, he said.

"The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service does not have enough staff or resources to immediately list every species that warrants protection under the act," said Tom Strickland, assistant secretary of the interior for fish, wildlife and parks.

Conservationists, however, have accused the agency of allowing species to languish on the list.

"The program is fundamentally broken," said Noah Greenwald, endangered species director for the Center for Biological Diversity, based in Tucson, Ariz. "At the rate that they have been listing species — about five to six species a year at most — I don't expect the sage grouse would see protection for a decade or more."

About two dozen species have gone extinct while waiting on the list, Greenwald said.

"Now that the federal government acknowledges the decline of sage grouse, we need to ensure that its land-management agencies reconcile their energy-development practices with the latest wildlife science," said Ben Deeble, a biologist with the National Wildlife Federation. "And we need strategies to cope with the impacts of drought, fires and invasive species brought on by climate change."

In Oregon, energy companies are planning rows of wind turbines not far from breeding areas, called leks, where male grouse strut about to attract mates this time of year. Wind-industry representatives said Friday that they would continue to work with government agencies and conservation groups to site turbines in appropriate spots.

"We think there is plenty of room in the West to have compatible energy development, both conventional and renewable, and still protect the sage grouse," Strickland said.

The government estimates that over half of the bird's original habitat has been lost to development, grazing, fire and weeds.

Surveys last year found sage grouse numbers in Oregon were down to about 22,000 from 40,000 in 2003, but sage grouse populations regularly fluctuate to such a degree, said Christian Hagen, grouse specialist for the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Estimating how many grouse existed pre-settlement is nearly impossible because only in recent decades have biologists been doing comprehensive tallies of leks, Hagen said.

"I don't think anyone refutes the fact that there were more grouse back then, but trying to quantify what it was back then to what it is now is incredibly difficult," he said.

Rangewide, the number of grouse has decreased about 3.5 percent a year between 1965 and 2003, according to a recent survey by the U.S. Geological Service.

A federal court reversed an earlier decision by the Bush administration that the species did not deserve protection. That led to the most recent review of the sage grouse's status.

The public now has 90 days to make formal comments on Friday's announcement.