



Nevada wildlife leader questions sage grouse decision

BY MARTIN GRIFFITH • Associated Press Writer • March 6, 2010

Nevada's wildlife chief has expressed concerns over a federal agency's listing priority for a population of sage grouse found along the Nevada-California line.

Ken Mayer, director of the Nevada Department of Wildlife, said the decision could affect mining, ranching and other activities in a wide area generally around the Mono Basin.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service concluded the listing of the population as an endangered or threatened species is warranted but precluded by higher priorities — other species considered in greater danger. The Interior Department earlier Friday announced a similar status for other sage grouse across the West.

Species that are candidates for listing are assigned a priority number between one and 12, with one being the highest priority. The population around the Mono Basin was given a three while sage grouse elsewhere were given an eight.

Mayer questioned whether a subspecies should be assigned such a high priority, and said the priority number of three means it could be listed within three to five years.

“This level of federal scrutiny could alter our ability to manage the species, and we are concerned that a listing could impact other activities in the area, such as mining or ranching,” Mayer said. “Nevertheless, if we work together as partners (to protect habitat), I’m hopeful we can turn the tide away from listing.”

A closer look

Fish and Wildlife Officials said the bird rated a higher priority level than sage grouse elsewhere because of its relative isolation and greater immediacy of threats.

The bird's range encompasses areas of Carson City, Lyon, Mineral, Esmeralda and Douglas counties in Nevada, and Alpine, Inyo and Mono counties in California.

Fish and Wildlife officials said threats to what it calls the “Bi-State Distinct Population Segment” of sage grouse include mining, energy development, livestock grazing, invasive weeds, urbanization and wildfire.

Reaction offered

Conservationists, meanwhile, criticized the agency’s failure to list the population as endangered or threatened.

“Continued delay of protection for the Mono Basin population of sage grouse is a recipe for extinction,” said Rob Mrowka, an ecologist at the Center for Biological Diversity.

Mark Salvo, director of the Sagebrush Sea Campaign, said Fish and Wildlife’s finding was important because it affirmed for the first time conservationists’ assertion that the population is genetically distinct and that the bird is warranted for listing under the Endangered Species Act.

Fish and Wildlife previously rejected that conclusion.

“Studies have shown that there’s likely fewer than 5,000 of the birds remaining,” Salvo said.

“Species have gone extinct on the tentative list waiting for final determination on listing status.”