

SUMMIT COUNTY CITIZEN VOICE

Conservation: Politics and reality clash in New Mexico

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Politicians never let good science get in the way of playing to their constituents

by Bob Berwyn

SUMMIT COUNTY — Politics and science are clashing in New Mexico, where a Republican congressman is spreading misinformation about the impacts of a proposed endangered species listing for the dunes sagebrush lizard.

Rep. Steve Pearce opposed the listing because he claims it would imperil oil and gas-related jobs. He was quoted in the Las Cruces Sun-News as stating, "Most of the oil and gas jobs in southeast New Mexico are at risk," adding that "[i]n the '70s, they listed the spotted owl as endangered, and it killed the entire timber industry."

The problem is, the spotted owl wasn't listed as an endangered species until the 1990s, and to blame the decline of the timber industry in The Pacific Northwest on the listing is over-simplification, according to officials with the New Mexico's state forestry division.

"Congressman Pearce's campaign of misinformation and hysteria is a threat to democracy," said Kierán Suckling, executive director for the Center. "A healthy



A sagebrush lizard, via the Creative Commons.

democracy requires good information and trustworthy politicians. When people like Pearce abuse their positions of power and promote hysteria with fear mongering, they undermine the foundation of democracy and civil society."

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service officials are on record as saying that listing wouldn't imperil jobs and that there's no data to support his claims.

But that's never stopped a politician from stepping into the endangered species fray, especially if the politician is tied to special interest groups. Open Secrets reports that Pearce received nearly \$1.2

million in campaign contributions from the oil and gas industry, more than any other single category of contributors.

"Spreading misinformation may serve Representative Pearce's big-pocketed campaign contributors in the oil and gas industry, but it certainly doesn't serve the public, which overwhelmingly supports saving species from extinction," said Suckling. "The dunes sagebrush lizard is a highly endangered species that has been recognized as needing protection by the Fish and Wildlife Service for more than a decade."

Protection for the lizard is unlikely to imperil jobs because the Fish and Wildlife Service almost never halts development projects altogether. Rather, the agency requires reasonable modification or mitigation ensuring that species aren't driven extinct and that the environment receives some protection.

The fact that protecting the lizard is unlikely to harm jobs is backed up by data obtained by the Center showing that the lizard has little impact on oil and gas leasing on federal lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management, which is where the lizard is primarily found.

For the second half of 2011, the Bureau nominated 23,723 acres for leasing, of which 3,484 acres (14.7 percent) was considered suitable. Of these lands, the agency will allow drilling on 2,924 acres (83.9 percent of suitable land) and only defer leasing on a mere 560 acres (2 percent of nominated lands).

"Contrary to Representative Pearce's claims, the sky will not fall because of protection of the dunes sagebrush lizard," said Suckling. "Although we recognize that oil and gas is going to continue to flow from this area, the sooner we can move to a green economy through conservation and by finding cleaner energy sources, the stronger we'll all be economically."

The Center petitioned for protection of the lizard in 2002 and subsequently sued to force the Fish and Wildlife Service to act. Instead of protecting the lizard, the agency placed the lizard on its "candidate" list, where it remained until December, when it was proposed for listing.