

NM agrees to protect habitat in Permian Basin

Friday, March 2, 2012

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ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. (AP) New Mexico on Friday signed a conservation agreement with the federal government to protect more than 387 square miles of habitat for two species that have been the focus of a bitter battle among environmentalists, politicians and oil and gas developers in New Mexico and West Texas.

New Mexico Land Commissioner Ray Powell said the agreement represents a “monumental step” toward finding a way to protect the lesser prairie-chicken and dunes sagebrush lizard while allowing for oil and gas development to continue in the Permian Basin.

“We’ve had enough of the circular firing squads,” Powell said during a signing ceremony attended by biologists, project managers and others from state and federal agencies who have worked for nearly a decade to line up conservation agreements with oil companies, ranchers and private land owners.

With New Mexico signing on, nearly 248,000 acres are being added to the conservation effort. Officials with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said that is the largest area to be set aside by a single state as part of a conservation agreement.

In all, 29 oil and gas companies and 39 ranchers have enrolled in the effort in New Mexico to cover more than 2.5 million acres.

Fish and Wildlife Service Southwest Deputy Director Joy Nicholopoulos said the agency recently approved a similar program in West Texas and landowners are starting to sign up.

“We believe these agreements are producing real results,” she said.

Having more people on the ground monitoring the two species has also helped give the agencies and landowners a better idea of how many prairie-chickens and lizards are out there and which areas include the best habitat.

The agency is expected to decide this summer whether to list the lizard as an endangered species. The prairie-chicken has been on the waiting list since 1998.

With conservation agreements, Nicholopoulos said energy developers and landowners take voluntary steps to protect habitat for the two species. In exchange, the agency agrees not to require more conservation efforts if the species were to be added to the federal list.

Nicholopoulos said saving the prairie-chicken and lizard are important because the two are indicator species that can signal changes in the environment. Learning more about those changes and how to adapt will ensure future generations can continue to benefit from the region’s resources, she said.

The listing of the lizard has been a hot button issue for U.S. Rep. Steve Pearce, R-N.M., and some elected officials in Texas. They’re concerned a listing would mean curtailed development and job losses across the Permian Basin, which makes up a large chunk of New Mexico’s oil and gas industry and accounts for more than two-thirds of Texas’ total oil production.

Nearly one-third of the basin's 8.1 million acres is made up of New Mexico trust land. State officials said there are more than 6,000 oil and gas leases in this area.

As part of the agreement, the state land office is classifying about 66,000 acres as off-limits to development to protect the species.

Pearce said Friday he looks forward to reviewing the details of the agreement.

"My issue is whether a listing is warranted. I believe it is not," he said. "I hope this agreement with the state, in addition to the one already in place with the counties and locals, will be taken seriously by Secretary Salazar before making a rush to judgment on a listing in June."

Powell said protection of the environment and energy development should not be viewed as mutually exclusive. He pointed to the industry as an economic driver and contributor to the trust that funds education, hospitals and other state initiatives.

"The bottom line is by creating this partnership and working with private landowners and the industries that are so important to the prosperity of the state, we're going to make sure we take care of the health of all species while we generate revenues and maintain good jobs in New Mexico."