

WILL SAGE MAKE THE LIST?

By Bodine
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The Bi-state sage grouse is back for a repeat performance on the Endangered Species stage. Conservation groups including the Center for Biological Diversity and Western Watersheds Project have filed a law-suit against the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (FWS) for its failure to list the bird in 2015.

Mono County has taken a big interest in the grouse, as more than 80 percent of all of its private land could be in jeopardy of being designated as "critical habitat" if the bird makes the cut, according to Scott Burns, Director of Community Development.

Coincidentally, Wendy Sugimura, Community Development Analyst for Mono County, was in Pennsylvania the same week the suit was filed, accepting the 2016 National Wildlife Conservation Partner for the county's conservation efforts. Mono County was the award's sole recipient. Burns said the county is going through the motions of being recognized, just like the listing is going through several litigation hurdles, such as the current suit.

The FWS had proposed to put the bird on the list in 2012, but decided to go with a conservation plan drafted by the Local Area Working Group (LAWG) comprised of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Bureau of Land Management ranchers, business owners, environmental groups and other stakeholders. The group created the Bi-State Action Plan, an update of the 2004 Greater Sage Grouse Conservation Plan for Nevada and Eastern California. Burns explained the county was a "small player" in the Plan.

The Plan addressed threats to the bird, like mining, grazing and development, and included 78 projects aimed at improving and enhancing the habitat. The 15-year effort and plan cost approximately \$45 million, according to the FWS.

Ileene Anderson, Senior Scientist for the Center for Biological Diversity told The Sheet the FWS made the wrong decision. FWS was proposing to list the bird in 2010 and again in 2013, and deemed that 1.8 million acres of the bird's habitat needed protection and was ready to establish the areas as "critical." Then, without warning or explanation, in 2015, the FWS decided the bird was fine.

“The service claims its reversal is based on a collection of voluntary conservation measures restricted to private lands in the Bi-state Action Plan ...in place for more than a decade while the sage grouse continued to decline,” Anderson said in a press release. Dan Hottle, spokesperson for FWS told The Sheet there were several factors that went into the agency’s decision. According to a study by Dr. Peter Coates, biologist for the US Geological Society, the bird’s population has flat-lined. Marry the population study with the work proposed in the Plan and, “We decided to give the Plan a try.”

He said a private conservation effort (the LAWG) is as good as a listing when the public is part of the process. Mono County Supervisor Tim Fesko said the public tends to be more cooperative when it has a say in a matter not having it shoved down their throats. The listing could have a major impact on Fesko’s district – the northern part of the county. The protection would create an extra layer of bureaucracy for private property, having to find out if their project would be effected.

Fesko was disappointed that environmental groups, some that were part of the LAWG, have decided to sue. “Everybody had their say,” he told The Sheet. Anderson said part of the Center’s responsibility is to investigate whether decisions are made behind the scenes. She added it’s not uncommon for politics to play a part in environmental issues.

“This is an example of politics trumping science while the extinction of a unique population of sage grouse hangs in the balance,” Anderson said. “As we have seen for more than a decade, these voluntary measures are not enough; without the legal protections of the Endangered Species Act, the sage grouse in Mono Basin have continued to decline, sliding toward extinction