

Here's how Trump's sage grouse fix could backfire

By [Dino Grandoni](#), Washington Post October 6

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Another day, another regulatory rollback from the Trump administration: This week, the Interior Department took another step toward reopening a conservation controversy over the sage grouse.

However, unlike most other regulatory changes undertaken by the Trump administration, this one doesn't have the full endorsement of local Republican politicians representing states with energy interests.

And with good reason: It could backfire, impose even more stringent regulations on Western states and energy companies operating in them and reshape the region's economy in way those governors never asked for.

Here's what happened Thursday: The Bureau of Land Management [issued a formal notice](#) of its intent to reconsider a plan to protect the greater sage grouse, a Western bird that makes its home in the sea of sagebrush that stretches from California to Colorado.

The complex conservation plan was born out of negotiations between the Interior Department, the BLM's parent agency, and Western governors, who sought to keep the bird off the endangered species list and avoid the stringent restrictions such a listing would impose on states.

But Interior, now under new management, felt the Obama-era deal was out of balance. In June, Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke asked for a review of plans to protect the sage grouse to see whether they limit jobs and energy development. Published in August, a 53-page report concluded that management responsibility for the bird, known for its flamboyant mating dance, should be shifted to the states.

“During this process, we are particularly interested in hearing from the many governors whose states put hard work and time into collaborative efforts to develop the existing plans,” BLM acting director Michael D. Nedd said in a statement. “We welcome their input.”

The issue: The thing is, Western governors already turned over their input. In a letter to Zinke in late May, the two co-chairs of the interstate [Sage-Grouse Task Force](#), Republican Gov. Matt Mead of Wyoming and Democratic Gov. John Hickenlooper of Colorado expressed their reservations about Interior's review.

“We understand that you are considering changing the Department's approach to sage-grouse, moving from a habitat management model to one that sets population objectives for the states,” Mead and Hickenlooper wrote. “We are concerned that this is not the right decision.”

Yet two weeks later, Zinke kicked off the review. And Mead, at least, is still apprehensive.

“We can’t have wholesale changes in wildlife management every four or eight years,” he told the Casper Star-Tribune this week. “I don’t think that is the best way to sustain populations or provide the necessary predictability to industry and business in our states.”

Why is that? Whit Fosburgh, president of the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, said part of the apprehension in the West came from fear that rolling back protections could shrink the sage grouse’s numbers — and lead to an endangered species listing.

“If they go too far in unraveling the basic framework of the agreement,” he said, “it will lead to a listing. That’s what everyone was trying to avoid.”

Nada Culver, senior counsel at the Wilderness Society, echoed that concern. Interior decided “to run at the plan with scissors and not think about what the consequences might be,” she said.

So who is happy here? Extraction companies operating out West, such as those represented by the National Mining Association and the Western Energy Alliance, praised Interior’s announcement, saying it fit squarely with Trump’s objective of developing U.S. energy resources.

“Today’s action shows the importance of fact-based policymaking,” NMA President Hal Quinn said in a statement. “This damaging and unnecessary ban would have barred mining on 10 million acres of mineral-rich lands, further increasing our import dependence.”

