

Mon Apr 29 2019

Conservationists promise fight over Nevada oil, gas leases

By Ken Ritter, Associated Press

LAS VEGAS (AP) — Conservationists say they will fight a federal government proposal to allow oil and gas drilling in remote northeast Nevada, including open range that's home to a dwindling species of ground-dwelling bird.

A Center for Biological Diversity official threatened lawsuits after the U.S. Bureau of Land Management opened a one-month comment period on Thursday about plans to lease eight parcels totaling about 25 square miles (65 square kilometers) west of Ely in White Pine County.

"If it goes forward with this plan, the BLM will end up in court yet again," said Kieran Suckling, executive director of a center that frequently takes the government to court over conservation issues.

"Covering 25 square miles of Nevada's last, best sage grouse habitat with oil rigs, roads and fences ... will push the grouse closer to extinction, worsen our climate crisis and cause massive air pollution," he said.

The government acknowledged in its announcement of a planned September land lease that the patchwork of parcels includes habitat for the imperiled greater sage grouse.

It called plans to lease land in the West for drilling part of a Trump administration effort to promote American energy independence.

"The oil and gas industry on public lands in Nevada contributed \$2.7 million in total economic output" in fiscal 2017, the bureau said.

However, Andy Maggi, executive director of the Nevada Conservation League, put the value outdoor recreation in Nevada, including in greater sage grouse habitat, at \$12.6 billion a year according to the Outdoor Industry Association.

"This move simply makes no sense," Maggi said Monday. "Nevadans ... have repeatedly said they do not want to see sensitive and treasured areas harmed by extractive industries."

The leasing plan announcement came just days after four conservation groups asked a federal judge in Boise, Idaho, to block a Trump administration plan to allowing drilling, mining and other activities they say will harm sage grouse in Idaho, Wyoming, Utah, Colorado, Nevada, California and Oregon.

Western Watersheds Project and other groups sued Interior Secretary David Bernhardt, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service over changes to land-management plans involving sage grouse.

Last month, the Trump administration finalized plans to ease land-use restrictions on energy companies and other industries in a way officials said would still protect the chicken-sized bird.

Sage grouse range across parts of 11 Western U.S. states and two Canadian provinces. They're known for an elaborate mating display that includes puffing out air sacs in their chests as they strut around breeding grounds known as leks. Their numbers have plummeted due to energy development, disease and other factors.

In Nevada, the U.S. Forest Service concluded in March that oil and gas leasing was not suitable in a northeast Nevada mountain range that is popular with hunters, fishermen and conservationists.

The agency said the potential for significant economic benefits was outweighed by grave concerns about the potential impacts on wildlife and the environment in the stream-laced Ruby Mountains — home to mule deer, sage grouse and numerous trout species.