

# Land deal protects sage grouse in Douglas County

By AP

RENO – Thousands of acres of ranchland along a scenic river in southern Douglas County will be protected under a conservation easement.

A deal announced last week preserves about 3,800 acres of the Fairfield Ranch, a move conservationists and land managers say will protect critical sage grouse habitat and the area's natural values.

Ranch owners Alan and Cindy Horn donated the conservation easement along with a stewardship endowment to the Nature Conservancy.

“Patience, perseverance and the generosity of the ranch owners made this shared dream a reality,” said Duane Petite of the conservancy's Eastern Sierra Nevada program.

The deal was four years in the making and involved talks with the Horns, the conservancy and state and federal agencies, the *Reno Gazette-Journal* reported.

Parts of the ranch straddle nearly three miles of the West Walker River and is considered vital habitat for a distinct subspecies of sage grouse that lives only along the Nevada-California line.

Ted Koch, Nevada supervisor for U.S. Fish and Wildlife, said the deal demonstrates the value of conservation easements in protecting habitat for the bistate sage grouse, which experts say number only about 5,000 birds.

The Fairfield Ranch area provides particularly valuable habitat, said Tony Wasley, director of the Nevada Department

of Wildlife.

“Fairfield Ranch has important wet meadows that are one of the most critical habitats to sage grouse in this arid environment,” Wasley said. “This easement has significant conservation value and is important to the long-term viability of sage grouse in the bistate area.”

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposed in October to list the bistate sage grouse as threatened under the Endangered Species Act. The proposal would designate about 1.8 million acres as critical habitat.

Public comments on a draft measure are being accepted through Feb. 10.

Those birds are separate from the greater sage grouse population, which is also under consideration for listing. Found in 11 Western states, the Fish and Wildlife Service will determine whether the greater sage grouse deserves protection as a threatened or endangered species by 2015.