

No federal protection for Sierra sage grouse

By Scott Sonner, AP

Interior Secretary Sally Jewell reversed the government's proposed federal protection for a type of sage grouse specific to California and Nevada, and said it shows it's still possible to head off a bigger, looming listing decision for the greater sage grouse across 11 Western states.

Jewell joined Nevada Gov. Brian Sandoval and others in announcing she's withdrawing the government's 2013 proposal to declare the bistate, Mono Basin sage grouse a threatened species along the California-Nevada line.

The bird found only along the Sierra's eastern front no longer faces the threat of extinction thanks to voluntary conservation efforts and range improvements initiated by ranchers, local governments, private land owners and public land managers, she said.

"What this has shown is that despite the stresses we feel on the landscape here – particularly around drought and wildfire and other stresses that impact this part of the world – we can still create and find habitat that supports sage grouse," Jewell said in a speech outside Nevada Department of Wildlife headquarters in Reno on Tuesday.

"There's no reason you can't have a healthy state with a healthy economy and a healthy ecosystem. By working together, you can have it all," she said.

The bistate bird is a genetically distinct population of the greater sage grouse species, which is under consideration for protection in Nevada, California and nine other states stretching from Oregon to the Dakotas.

“This is welcome news for all Nevadans,” said Sandoval, a Republican. “Working together, I’m hopeful we can preclude the need to list the greater sage grouse just as we have done with the bistate.”

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is under a court order to make a listing decision on the greater sage grouse by Sept. 30 in a legal battle with conservationists that spans more than 15 years.

“I think it is very possible not to list that species,” Jewell told reporters after her bistate announcement.

Conservationists who petitioned to protect both populations accused Jewell of caving to pressure from Western conservatives who fear federal protection would mean dramatic restrictions on livestock grazing, energy exploration and other development of public lands.

Michael Connor, California director of the nonprofit Western Watersheds Project, said that as recently as last December federal officials had assigned the bistate grouse the “maximum priority for listing” based on the magnitude of threats facing the isolated population across more than 7,000 square miles Carson City to near Yosemite National Park.

“The service’s backpedalling in claiming that unfinished management plans and voluntary, cooperative agreements will protect the species is untrue and smacks of political expediency,” Connor said Tuesday.

Randi Spivak, public lands director for the Center for Biological Diversity, agreed. “Half measures may delay extinction but it won’t prevent it,” Spivak said.

Jewell said the decision not to list the bistate grouse should be “real encouraging” for other western states pursuing similar voluntary measures to ward off listing of the greater sage grouse.

“I think if it had been listed after all the hard work and effort after 15 years, it would make people discouraged – ‘Gosh, we’ve worked together so hard and maybe there isn’t a way to protect these ecosystems,’ ” Jewell told reporters.

She said Tuesday’s decision should “give the scientists and the land managers and the private land owners and the ranchers and the state and governors all encouragement that we need to stay the course on the greater sage course and we’ll be able to achieve a similar outcome if we work together.”

Mary Grim, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s regional sage grouse coordinator, said the agency was concerned about the rate of habitat loss when it proposed listing the bistate bird as threatened two years ago. Since then, ranchers, conservationists and government agencies have committed more than \$45 million to restoration efforts over the next 15 years, making the listing unnecessary, she said.

“If you look at the science, look at the commitments we have, clearly in comparison to 2010, the future looks very bright for bistate sage grouse,” Grim told the Associated Press. “There’s no reason to think the subspecies is at risk now or in the future of going extinct.”