

Water, sage grouse dominate governors' forum



This year's annual Western Governors' Association conference is in Incline Village. Photo/Provided

By Anne Knowles

INCLINE VILLAGE – Water data and sage grouse were the main topics on the opening day of the Western Governors' Association annual meeting.

The three-day conference kicked off June 24 with the release of the WGA's drought forum report, what Nevada Gov. Brian Sandoval, WGA's current chairman, called a "living document."

The report was introduced during the initial panel, which included governors from nine western states as well as a consultant from Deloitte Consulting and Oklahoma's secretary of Energy and Environment.

The panel was followed by a keynote speech by Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell, who took questions from the governors.

They were mostly concerned with the possible listing of the sage grouse as an endangered species.

The drought report is a broad overview of the WGA's findings with links to its website for more detailed information on the group's yearlong investigation of the drought, including meeting videos and webinars, and resources such as the U.S. Drought Monitor from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and stream flow and runoff data from the U.S. Geological Survey.



Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell is working to keep her department's budget intact. Photo/Provided

The report is more a resource than a remedy and makes no specific recommendations.

Sandoval said there is no cookie cutter solution for the affected states.

"What is certain is this unprecedented drought is a critical issue if not the critical issue for the west," Sandoval said.

The report focuses on seven areas, including conservation and infrastructure, but the WGA panel zeroed in on one: data and analysis.

Manson Brown, assistant secretary of commerce for environmental observation and prediction, said the data says

there is no let up in sight.

“The seasonal outlook though Sept. 15 is for the drought to persist or intensify west of the Rockies,” he said.

Brown was asked by several governors how reliable is the data since the states rely on it to make policy. Brown said the farther out the timeframe, the less trustworthy the forecast, but that technology will soon allow a 30-day forecast as reliable as today’s 10-day outlook.

“They are very accurate, but there is always uncertainty in a hypercomplex system like the Earth,” he said.

William Sarni, director and practice leader for water strategy social impact at Deloitte Consulting, said it’s important to find better ways to convey the data.

“There is a lot of information out there and we need to present it better visually to engage people,” Sarni said.

The report itself says “groundwater data, predictive climate models for drought and analytical tools that allow users to compare multiple datasets over time were all cited ... as ongoing needs.”

Jewell in her keynote speech implored the governors to help convince Congress not to cut the Interior budget by a proposed 15 percent.

“We really need to move beyond this mindless sequestration,” said Jewell.

The administration is also working on moving wildfire money into the disaster budget, she said.

In the morning before the WGA meeting, Jewell and Sandoval met with firefighters and personnel working to contain the 17,000-acre Washington Fire south of Markleeville.



Gov. Brian Sandoval is host of this year's governors' conference. Photo/Provided

Jewell said she is hopeful the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will decide not to add sage grouse to the endangered species list, a decision expected in September.

Utah Gov. Gary Herbert said his state's sage grouse management plan was 75 pages versus the Bureau of Land Management's plan encompassed in four large binders.

"I want to protect the sage grouse, but not to the detriment of economic development," said Herbert, who added that other interests were using the bird in hopes of killing further oil and gas development.

Wyoming Gov. Matthew Mead wondered if the sage grouse pointed to a bigger problem with the act.

"Regardless of the decision there's going to be lawsuits and some judge will decide," said Mead. "Is the Endangered Species Act working then?"

Jewell conceded there have been problems with the act, but that her department was working on involving states and scientists up front to make sure listings weren't too easy to get.

Arizona Gov. Doug Ducey, Colorado Gov. John Hickenlooper, Idaho Gov. Butch Otter, Montana Gov. Steve Bullock, North

Dakota Gov. Jack Dalrymple as well as Guam Gov. Eddie Calvo also took part in the panel.

The meeting continues through Friday morning at the Hyatt Regency in Incline Village.