

# Deseret News

## Critics lash out at BLM proposal for sage grouse

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Published: Thursday, Nov. 7 2013 12:42 p.m. MST



A male greater sage grouse struts at a lek near Henefer, Sunday, April 16, 2006. The Bureau of Land Management intends to prevent that listing, but conservation groups have criticized the federal agency's plan. (Christopher Watkins, Deseret News archives)

**SALT LAKE CITY —** The Utah Bureau of Land Management's proposal to help prevent the greater sage grouse from being added to Endangered Species list is the weakest plan environmentalists said they have seen so far and all but "guarantees" the bird will land on the list.

"Their plan will be Exhibit A for why sage grouse should be listed," said Kevin Mueller with the Utah Environmental Congress. "The BLM's proposed action will lower protections

that are already in place in the four national forests in Utah."

Mueller said current U.S. Forest Service policy requires the agency to render a biological opinion for sensitive species and prohibits any activity that poses "measurable negative impacts" to the sage grouse.

In the BLM proposed alternative released last week and up for public comment, the federal agency does not propose forbidding new activity on sage-grouse occupied habitat on Forest Service land, Mueller said.

"This actually removes protections that exist for sage grouse on Forest Service lands."

The BLM Utah examined a range of alternatives and released a 1,000-plus-page environmental impact statement, knowing its proposal would be met with criticism on both sides who either claim it does too much or not enough, said Quincy Bahr, the agency's specialist over greater sage grouse.

"That is why this is only a draft and you will not see the word, 'preferred,' alternative in this document very often. We anticipate the final result will be a blend."

But Mueller said the BLM Utah plan is a chance for that federal agency to assert it is doing enough to protect the bird.

"This is a test to see if federal agencies can come up with their own standard to protect



A Gunnison sage grouse is on the prairie. The Bureau of Land Management recently took action to mark fences so the birds would stop running into them and dying. (Howie Garber, Deseret News archives)

the species instead of relying on the Endangered Species Act to recover the sage grouse," he said. "To me, this plan says we are doomed for failure."



Greater Sage grouse walk in the snow. The Bureau of Land Management intends to prevent that listing, but conservation groups have criticized the federal agency's plan. (Howie Garber, Deseret News archives)

Mueller and other critics like WildEarth Guardians say that Utah — unlike other Western states with greater sage grouse populations — actually has Forest Service lands that contain the sensitive leks, which are traditional gathering places for the male species to engage in competitive strutting and other displays to attract the females.

In late 2015, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is slated to announce its decision on whether to list the greater the sage grouse, which has suffered

a habitat loss of around 50 percent in 15 Western states.

Utah and other federal agencies have been painstakingly working to come up with elaborate conservation plans to stave off such a listing, which would bring a halt to even the most benign activities where the bird exists.

On Thursday, the Utah Bureau of Land Management unveiled its proposed alternative contained in a draft environmental impact statement that is out for public comment until Jan. 29.

It has also scheduled a series of [informational open houses](#) to detail its plan, which poses more stringent restrictions the state of Utah had put forward but still lacks appropriate protections, according to critics.

Molvar said he's looked at the BLM Utah plan and 10 other similar conservation proposals, and Utah's is particularly lacking protections.

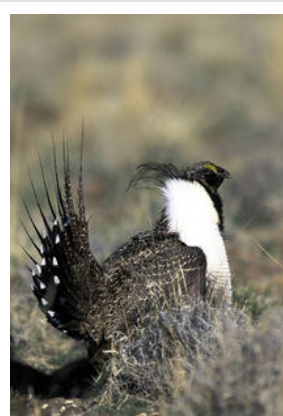
"These Utah plan revisions offer the weakest protections from oil and gas drilling that we've seen proposed anywhere in sage grouse habitat," said Erik Molvar with WildEarth Guardians.

He said the problem is while the plan proposes to forbid any new drilling activity within four miles of a lek, it contains too many loopholes for existing activity that occurs because of leases that have already been granted.

"There is a 5 percent disturbance cap, but that allows for loopholes and does not offer the kind of scientifically sound protection the sage grouse needs," he said. "On the existing leases that are already there in priority habitat, industry could put oil and gas wells anywhere it wanted to. It does not account for oil and gas leases already on the ground today that cover vast acreage of the sage grouse."

He said the BLM approach actually encourages the oil and gas industry to develop existing leases to the fullest extent possible because once the lease expires, it will fall under new restrictions proposed in the plan.

"An unfortunate outcome of the BLM approach is that it trades off sage grouse protection sometime in the future for a very strong likelihood of massive habitat destruction in the near term," he said.



The greater sage grouse is in danger of being listed as an endangered species. The Bureau of Land Management intends to prevent that listing, but conservation groups have criticized the federal agency's plan. (Environmental Defense Fund)

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