

Wilderness group: Heller-Reid sage grouse bill lacks sufficient protections

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A male sage grouse shows off his plumage. A male sage grouse displays his plumage in an effort to woo an female north of Gerlach in 2005. RGJ file FOR FILE. A male sage grouse displays his plumage in an effort to woo an unseen female in the highlands area north of Gerlach on Tuesday, April 12, 2005. Photo by David B. Parker. / RGJ file.

Legislation proposed by Nevada's U.S. senators lacks sufficient strength to protect habitat needed by the state's population of greater sage grouse and to prevent the bird's listing under the Endangered Species Act, an environmental group said Tuesday.

WildEarth Guardians says the discussion bill drafted by U.S. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., and U.S. Sen. Dean Heller, R-Nev., has merit but does not go far enough, in part because it fails to address the central issue of overgrazing of sage grouse habitat on federal land.

“The potential for this bill to address the threat is pretty limited,” Erik Molvar, wildlife biologist for WildEarth Guardians, said.

The Nevada Sagebrush Landscape Conservation and Development Act, a draft of which was unveiled by Reid and Heller late last December, would allow creation of new wilderness areas on land within existing wilderness study areas and inventoried roadless areas where they overlap with identified sage grouse habitat.

It would raise money for habitat restoration through sale of federal land identified by Nevada counties and through fees assessed on any development allowed within sage grouse habitat.

The proposal was offered by the senators as a means to help prevent listing of the greater sage grouse as a threatened or endangered species by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, with a decision due in the fall of 2015. There are concerns a listing would come with crippling cost to agriculture, mining, renewable energy development and outdoor recreation, seriously affecting the Silver State’s overall economy.

“I am pleased to work with Sen. Reid on this discussion draft, which would help mitigate the negative effects of such a listing and assist both the governor and the Sagebrush Ecosystem Council in addressing threats to sage grouse habitat,” Heller said in a statement in December.

Both Reid and Heller said they welcomed further input about the bill, which Reid called a “bi-partisan, Nevada-specific proposal to conserve sage-grouse habitat and provide for economic development in the state.”

An analysis of the bill by the environmental group concluded it “fails to be large enough in geographic scope and bold enough in conservation prescriptions” to adequately protect endangered sagebrush terrain.

Among WildEarth Guardians’ key findings are that potential wilderness designations would only protect about 4.5 million acres, or about 14 percent, of priority and occupied sage grouse habitat areas across Nevada.

Of particular concern, the group contends, is the bill’s failure to address overgrazing and how that practice perpetuates a cycle of invading cheatgrass and widespread wildfires that decimate sagebrush steppes. The group notes the bill specifically allows for continued grazing in the new wilderness areas it would establish.

“The proposed legislation as currently drafted does nothing to address the threat posed by inappropriate levels of livestock grazing, which have been identified as a principal threat to sage

grouse persistence in Nevada,” the group wrote in its analysis, citing a 2013 study by U.S. Fish and Wildlife.

“The most important threat to sage grouse persistence in Nevada is overgrazing by domestic livestock, principally cattle and sheep, and the spread of the invasive weed cheatgrass that follows heavy livestock grazing,” the group wrote.

Among suggested changes to the legislation proposed by WildEarth Guardians would be a provision allowing for voluntary buy-out of government grazing allotments by willing ranchers currently using sage grouse habitat.

Proposals in the Reid-Heller bill offer potential when coupled with those proposed in management plans by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service, Molvar said. The two agencies late last year released a preferred policy option that would, among other things, exclude or restrict new wind, solar and mineral development and new recreational facilities in sage grouse habitat on federal land.

“The legislation as currently proposed does not protect most sage grouse habitats, and thus it is no substitute for the protections being contemplated in federal land-use plans,” Molvar said in a statement. “But if it is paired with strong and science-based protections in federal plan amendments that shield sage grouse priority habitats from the threats facing them, together these measures could establish sufficient protections to recover sage grouse populations to secure numbers and render Endangered Species Act listing unnecessary.”