

Clock ticking on sage grouse listing decision

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(Photo: TRIBUNE PHOTO/LARRY BECKNER)

FORT BENTON— The clock is ticking on a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service decision whether to protect sage grouse using the Endangered Species Act, and it won't be an easy call, a Montana-based FWS official told a federal advisory council Tuesday.

"The hardest part of the job is, 'How do you know if it is or isn't threatened?'" said Jodi Bush, field supervisor for the FWS Montana office in Helena. "It's the analysis that tells us that, to the best of our ability."

The Bureau of Land Management's Central Montana Resource Advisory Council, which gives input to the BLM on land-management issues, is conducting two days of meetings here this week.

And officials with FWS and the state of Montana were invited to speak to RAC members Tuesday on a potential sage grouse listing and the process FWS is undertaking to make the decision.

Some 64 percent of the bird's remaining habitat in the West falls on federal land, including those managed by the BLM. The BLM, along with the Forest Service and states, already is revising land management planning documents to include regulations that would offer better protections.

By improving the plans, the state and federal agencies hope to avert a listing, which would bring even tougher restrictions on land uses such as energy development and grazing in sage grouse habitat.

"We can't conserve the bird without everyone's help," Bush said.

Sage grouse, found in 11 western states including Montana, occupy 56 percent of their former range.

FWS plans to make a listing decision in less than a year, by September, 2015, Bush told RAC members.

She described the difficult listing process in terms of a scale involving weighing and balancing a number of factors including its current status, new scientific information, assessing threats and coming up with models.

"Habitat fragmentation really is the key," Jeff Berglund, a FWS wildlife biologist, said of the bird's biggest threat.

The bird is long-lived, surviving one to three years with some birds surviving up to 10 years, but it has low reproductive rates, Berglund said.

"They're not like pheasants that kind of live fast and hard and crank out a lot of offspring and die young," Berglund said.

Montana has 18 percent of the remaining population, second behind Wyoming.

Across the bird's entire range, 47 populations remain including seven in Montana.

"Pretty important in the context of a listing decision," Berglund said of the Montana populations.

Leks are open areas where communal displays occur, Berglund said. Males puff out air sacks in their chest to attract females.

The leks are usually found in areas where females are abundant, and they are indicators of good surrounding nesting habitat, with most nesting occurring within four to five miles of the leks, Berglund said.

In Montana, the biggest and best areas of sage grouse habitat are found in the northeast, in Phillips and Valley counties, and in the southeastern corner, in Carter County, Berglund said.

Energy development, conversion of sage brush to agricultural lands, infrastructure such as roads, invasive species, mining and improper grazing are the biggest threats to the habitat, which provides food, cover and reproduction for the bird, Berglund said.

If it's lost, sage brush won't come back naturally for 20 to 50 years, he said.

Jim McCollum, a RAC member, asked where disease falls within the list of threats.

And Troy Blunt, a Phillips County commissioner, said the three factors he sees impacting sage grouse the most where he lives is disease, primarily West Nile virus, predators and hunting.

Disease and predation were factors the agency considered before deciding in 2010 that listing was warranted, but precluded because of higher priorities, but they did not rise to the level of a range-wide threat, Bush said. When a listing decision is made, other factors that are considered are current or threatened destruction, overuse of habitat, inadequate regulations and other natural or management factors, she said.

To be listed as endangered, a species must be in danger of becoming extinct throughout a significant portion of its range, Bush said. To be listed as threatened, it is likely a species will become endangered within the foreseeable future. The agency also could determine that listing is not warranted.

Currently, FWS is requesting data on sage grouse habitat and sage grouse from states, tribes and other federal agencies, Bush said. That information should be in hand by the end of this month. In January and February, FWS will begin reviewing and analyzing that information from 13 states.

Gov. Steve Bullock created a sage-grouse habitat conservation council to develop a state plan to protect sage grouse. Shawn Thomas, administrator of the Trust Land Division of the state Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, was involved in that process.

Self-imposed restraints are better than restraints implemented as a result of the a federal listing, Thomas told RAC members. Over the past 10 years, his office has spent a lot of time on habitat conservation plans for bull trout and grizzly bears, which were previously listed, he said.

"Adding anything to the Endangered Species Act is going to make our life much more difficult," Thomas said.

Bullock's executive order calling for the state conservation plan will eventually require state agencies that issue permits for projects on the state-managed property to factor in the impact on sage grouse, Thomas said. It also will establish a conservation fund. In the 2015 Legislature, money will likely be sought to implement the program, he said.

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What's next

The Central Montana Resource Advisory Council meets from 8 a.m. to noon Wednesday at the Grand Union Hotel in Fort Benton. At 9 a.m., members will hear an update on a proposal to provide access into the Bullwhacker area. A public comment period is at 10 a.m. RAC members plan to tour the Missouri Breaks Interpretive Center at 10:30 p.m.

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