

Don't toss out cooperation in the West's sage country

Giving sage grouse endangered status would also protect their habitat from development, but that could also get expensive. Video provided by Newsy Newslook



(Photo: Nevada Department of Wildlife)

During the holiday season, many people put significant effort into plans for getting along with one another at family gatherings. Seating plans are carefully strategized and touchy subjects avoided. We've learned that enjoying our shared holiday demands that we all compromise a little.

Plans for cooperation in managing the vast shrub-steppe plains of the American West – including thousands of acres in Nevada – are no different.

A few years ago, conflict there seemed inevitable. Environmental organizations asked the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to list sage grouse – a bellwether for declining ecological conditions of the Intermountain West – as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act. On the other hand, private landowners, industry groups and grazing permittees on federal land managed by the Bureau of Land Management worried that protections for the birds could eliminate their already-thin profit margins and independent way of life in a difficult rural landscape.

Amid these uncertainties, regional stakeholders launched an unprecedented effort to develop a plan – if not for outright harmony, at least toward a workable outline for coexistence. Western states, federal agencies, environmental organizations, landowners, sportsmen and women, and industry representatives worked together for many months to develop a management strategy to improve protections for sage grouse habitat while allowing our public lands to stay open for multiple uses. It was a truly cooperative and collaborative process.

Underlining the federal government's commitment to the resulting strategy, BLM integrated these protections into the agency's land management plans. The drive for a cooperative solution on the range succeeded; FWS decided it was not necessary to add sage grouse to the ESA's protected rolls in light of the compromises placed into in BLM's and others' plans.

Enter the Trump administration. Like a grumpy uncle who arrives late for dinner and wants his way no matter what, the new president instructed Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke to identify federal policies across the West that "burden" fossil fuel development. Zinke's resulting report identified the negotiated protections in BLM's land management plans as standing in the way of maximum oil and gas development on federal lands. In October, Interior took the next step by launching a public process to consider eliminating the agreed-upon protections for sage grouse habitat, the basis for the decision not to list the birds. Secretary Zinke could act soon revise BLM's plans.

The Trump administration's unilateral bid to blow up years of cooperative effort in sage grouse country to benefit a single industry is an extraordinarily bad idea. The western governors who participated the federal-state task force that helped negotiate a cooperative approach to resource management in the region – including Governor Sandoval – asserted in a letter to Secretary Zinke that "wholesale changes to the [BLM] land use plans are likely not necessary at this time." Since the current administration stresses deference to states on resource management issues, this bipartisan sentiment from states in the West should prod Interior to back off.

The law also favors leaving in place the hard-won balance between new protections for sage grouse and continued use of natural resources reflected in BLM's revised land management plans. FWS's decision not to list sage grouse as threatened or endangered hinged on the agency's finding that new management strategies in the Intermountain West would improve ecological conditions in the birds' habitat without invoking the ESA's strict legal standards and procedures. If BLM weakens protections for sage grouse, environmental advocates have a strong case the birds need ESA protections. There's little doubt a sage grouse listing would impose more burdens on oil and gas development – as well as on other resource uses – than the negotiated management standards in BLM's current plans.

The Trump administration should learn a lesson from families throughout the country who will orchestrate their next gathering to share a common table despite their differences. This spirit should continue to guide resource management and sage grouse protections throughout the West's sagebrush sea – where carefully crafted, bipartisan compromises should remain in place.

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