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Frack Quietly, Please: Sage Grouse Is Nesting

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A conservation effort across the West to protect the sage grouse, a bird with an unusual mating call, has put different environmental interests at odds.

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Photo by Jerret Raffety/Rawlins Daily Times, via Associated Press.

CASPER, Wyo. — In a new oil field among the rolling hills near here, Chesapeake Energy limits truck traffic to avoid disturbing the breeding and nesting of a finicky bird called the greater sage grouse. To the west, on a gas field near Yellowstone National Park, Shell Oil is sowing its own special seed mix to grow plants that nourish the birds and hide their chicks from predators.

And on a 320,000-acre ranch near the northern tail of the Sierra Madres, developers of an enormous wind farm have decided not to plant turbines where some of the best onshore winds in the world blow because it is in prime grouse territory.

The spotted owl never had it this good. But like that bird, which became a bitter symbol of the conflict between the environment and economic development a generation ago, the greater sage

grouse — a chickenlike bird known for its flamboyant courtship strut — has seen its numbers plunge far and fast.

Now, federal officials are weighing putting it on the endangered species list — setting off a mad scramble among the unlikeliest of allies to save the bird and avoid disrupting the nation’s enormous growth in energy production. With a range stretching over more than 165 million resource-rich acres across 11 states, the grouse is at the center of one of the country’s most important struggles: to balance the demand for energy against the needs of nature. And in the process, it has put two environmental priorities — preserving species and fostering renewable energy — on a collision course.



Garry Miller and Kara Choquette of the Power Company of Wyoming at the site of a wind power project.

Credit Jim Wilson/The New York Times

“Remember the economic impact of the spotted owl and how much it reduced timber production on federal lands?” Representative Cory Gardner, Republican of Colorado, said in an interview. “The sage grouse has seven times the acreage of the spotted owl. You are looking at billions of dollars in lost economic activity, millions of dollars in lost state and local revenues and tens of thousands of jobs being lost.”

Environmentalists say the only way to save the grouse is to restrict use of the lands — whether for energy, housing, mining, ranching, hunting or recreation — which is exactly what an endangered species designation would do. Already, federal officials have delayed, altered or denied permits for more than two dozen energy projects in the West because of the bird.

“The sage grouse issue may finally put the brakes on the fossil-fuel industry in a way that no other factor has been able to,” said Erik Molvar, a wildlife biologist at WildEarth Guardians, an advocacy group.

That prospect has prompted an unusual collaboration among state and industry leaders to show federal wildlife officials, who have until September 2015 to decide on the endangered designation, how the bird can coexist with economic development. And federal officials, frequently at odds with one another over such matters in the past, are in on the act, overseeing an enormous effort among all the affected states to pre-empt the designation.

But that will not be easy.

Distribution of Greater Sage Grouse



Once abundant in at least 13 Western states and three Canadian provinces, the greater sage grouse now covers 11 states — California, Colorado, Idaho, North and South Dakota, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, Washington and Wyoming. Federal wildlife officials say the bird’s numbers have declined as much as 80 percent over the last century, largely because of loss of habitat.

Environmentalists estimate its population at 150,000 to 400,000, less than 10 percent of its historical abundance.

Nowhere is the scramble more intense than in Wyoming, which claims more than a quarter of the remaining habitat and has a commitment to development of energy, which has boomed here. The sweeping valleys and wide-open ranchlands contain valuable resources including oil, natural gas, uranium, low-sulfur coal and wind, whose harnessing could all but stop if the grouse were listed as an endangered species.

Recognizing this, the state began writing a conservation plan six years ago that now serves as a model. But many environmentalists say Nevada, Utah and Colorado are still behind, and if even a few states lag, the greater sage grouse could go the way of other threatened species like spotted owls and piping plovers.

Gov. Matt Mead of Wyoming expressed frustration with that prospect, given his state's preservation of 15 million acres of land at a cost of \$32 million and millions of dollars more from the private sector. He suggested that a listing could jeopardize conservation efforts in the state.

"If you pull the rug from under us on this, what is going to be the incentive for Wyoming to continue to show leadership?" Mr. Mead said in an interview, referring to federal officials.



Sage grouse in a part of Wyoming where Shell has gas fields.

Credit Jim Wilson/The New York Times

On paper, at least, the Wyoming plan is in line with federal goals, officials say. It cordons off large areas as critical for the bird to survive, and its authors say it is the best compromise they could fashion.

Nestled in the gray-green sagebrush on the sprawling ranches or pecking their way along the dusty roads near the Pinedale Anticline gas fields, the squat, mottled-brown birds appeared unruffled. But they are persnickety creatures easily disturbed by human activities. Every year, males return to relatively open areas called leks, splaying their tail feathers and puffing up their chests as they waddle and call to attract hens. Vulnerable to predators like coyotes and eagles, the grouse depends on vast expanses of sagebrush for food and shelter. Wyoming's plan would restrict development to levels that would not disturb the birds. For example, it would limit surface disturbance to 5 percent a square mile and ban activity within 0.6 miles of the leks.

Many environmentalists say those limitations are inadequate. "Development within six miles of a lek really hurts the bird," said Randi Spivak, public lands program director at the Center for Biological Diversity. The center says broader priority habitats need to be set aside to guarantee population growth.

Paradoxically, the issue has taken the biggest toll on wind, a renewable source of energy considered important in the fight against climate change, which itself threatens the bird's future.

Although Wyoming's wide-open landscape makes it home to some of the country's strongest winds, several planned projects have stalled. The one that is proceeding on the ranch near the Sierra Madres owned by the billionaire Philip F. Anschutz's company will be less productive than it might have been.

On a recent afternoon at the ranch, Garry L. Miller, a vice president at the Power Company of Wyoming, which oversees the project, stood high on a hill overlooking expanses of sagebrush. He pointed out how the company had changed its plan to avoid a slope that is prime grouse habitat. "There is no bright line for us. We stand over there, we can put a turbine. We stand over there, we can't," he said.

In the end, even officials like Bob Budd, chairman of the state team trying to save the bird, say their efforts may not be enough. "It's the gazillion-dollar question we are all wrestling with," he said.