



Rampant energy development threatens sage grouse, other iconic American species

Across much of the West, springtime begins with a strange ritual. The male greater sage grouse – beefy birds weighing as much as seven pounds – gather on windswept hilltops and open plateaus, spreading their long, spiky tail feathers and inflating air sacs beneath their shaggy white breasts, filling the cold morning air with loud, liquid “plops” that can be heard miles away. There may be dozens of males displaying together in what scientists call a “lek,” advertising themselves to the shy, camouflaged females waiting nearby.

This bizarre and lovely tradition has fallen on hard times. More than 90 percent of the sagebrush habitat that once dominated vast stretches of the West – and provided a home to grouse and many other kinds of birds, animals and plants – has been destroyed or altered. Sage grouse populations, once found in 12 states and three Canadian provinces, have declined drastically, and disappeared entirely from Nebraska and British Columbia.

And, the future does not look good for the once common sage grouse, as the quality of its habitat continues to decline in almost every part of its range. Energy development, especially natural gas and mineral extraction, is exploding across the West, with new well sites and roads crisscrossing what had once been empty sagebrush. In 2006, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife decided against listing the species as endangered in large part because of conservation measures promised by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). However, the BLM has no specific statutory duty to conserve wildlife, and the coal-bed methane industry has been pressing the agency to relax what restrictions do exist. As a result, sage grouse and other iconic species like mule deer, elk, and pronghorn antelope are being driven into smaller and smaller ranges, threatening their long-term abundance, and even survival.

A wildlife legacy for the future

Wildlife is a fundamental part of America’s history and character, and wildlife conservation is a core value shared by all Americans. It provides economic, social, educational, recreational, and emotional benefits. The economic value of hunting, fishing, and wildlife-associated recreation is estimated to contribute \$100 billion to the American economy. Wildlife habitat, including forests, grasslands,

riparian lands, wetlands, and rivers and other water bodies is an essential component of the American landscape, and is valued by federal, state and local governments, Native American tribes, private landowners, conservation organizations, and millions of American sportsmen and outdoor enthusiasts.

Prioritizing robust, healthy wildlife populations

New legislation is needed to assure that viable populations of wildlife are maintained on lands managed by the BLM, as well as the U.S. Forest Service. A statutory mandate to conserve viable populations on public lands would greatly improve the conservation of wildlife on those lands, and would help protect species like the sage grouse from further decline. Helping to keep common species common, including species valued for recreational opportunities, helps keep wildlife species from becoming endangered in the first place, and allows us pass on a real wildlife legacy to future generations.

