

Budget bill blocks Endangered Species protection for sage grouse

March 21, 2022



Conservation groups are slamming a spending deal in Congress that's expected to pass this week - because it would forbid Endangered Species Act protections for an imperiled bird in the West.

The sage grouse population in the high desert country of Western states has dropped 80% since 1965. Yet federal spending bills have included this prohibition since 2014.

This year, the initial bill dropped the ESA prohibition - but the final version restored it. Robert Dewey, vice president for government relations with the group Defenders of Wildlife, called it a huge missed opportunity.

"Policy on the sage grouse must be driven by science and not politics," said Dewey. "I think it's time to end this prohibition and allow biologists to determine whether this species needs federal protection."

Sage grouse rely on sagebrush for food and shelter, and their habitat has dwindled with development and energy exploration.

In 2015, the Obama administration negotiated a major compromise to protect the bird - a settlement between conservation groups, state agencies, the feds, ranchers, tribes, and the oil industry. However, the Trump administration opted to weaken that agreement.

Dewey said this year, Republicans insisted on maintaining the requirement to keep the sage grouse from being classified as endangered. He blamed pressure from the fossil-fuel industry.

"Since 2015, 1.6 million acres of sage grouse habitat have been leased for oil and gas purposes," said Dewey. "So there's no doubt the oil and gas industry is no fan of greater protections for the sage grouse."

Sage grouse habitat covers 11 states, from California east to the Dakotas. The same area supports more than 350 other declining species, including pronghorn, mule deer, pygmy rabbit, elk and almost 200 species of birds.