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No Endangered Status for Plains Bird

By **JOHN M. BRODER**

WASHINGTON — The [Interior Department](#) said Friday that the greater sage grouse, a dweller of the high plains of the American West, was facing extinction but would not be designated an endangered species for now.

Yet the decision in essence reverses a 2004 determination by the Bush administration that the sage grouse did not need protection, a decision that a federal court later ruled was tainted by political tampering with the Interior Department's scientific conclusions.

Interior Secretary [Ken Salazar](#), a conservative Democrat from a Colorado ranching family, sought to carve a middle course between conservationists who wanted ironclad protections for the ground-hugging bird and industry interests and landowners who sought the ability to locate mines, wells, windmills and power lines in areas where the grouse roam.

Mr. Salazar said that scientists at the United States [Fish and Wildlife Service](#) had concluded that the sage grouse deserved inclusion on the endangered species list but that other species were facing more imminent threats, leading the government to assign the bird a status known as "warranted but precluded."

As a compromise measure, he said, the bird will be placed on the list of "candidate species" for future inclusion on the list and its status will be reviewed yearly.

The middle-ground decision is typical of Mr. Salazar's stewardship at the Interior Department, where he has tried to mediate between competing energy and environmental interests. Like many previous decisions, including compromises on oil drilling in Utah and [habitat protection for the polar bear](#) in the Arctic, Mr. Salazar's action left both sides somewhat disgruntled.

Residential building and energy development have shrunk the sage grouse habitat over the past several decades, causing its population in 11 Western states to dwindle from an estimated 16 million 100 years ago to 200,000 to 500,000 today.

“The sage grouse’s decline reflects the extent to which open land in the West has been developed in the last century,” Mr. Salazar said in a statement. “This development has provided important benefits, but we must find common-sense ways of protecting, restoring and reconnecting the Western lands that are most important to the species’ survival while responsibly developing much-needed energy resources.”

He said that state resource agencies would be instructed to take stronger steps to preserve the sagebrush where the birds live. Federal wildlife and lands agencies will oversee those efforts.

In 2004, the Bush administration Interior Department **decided** against listing the sage grouse as endangered or threatened, despite reports from agency scientists that the bird and its habitat were in jeopardy. Three years later, a federal judge ruled that a senior Interior Department political appointee, Julie MacDonald, had intimidated agency scientists and overruled their findings. She later **resigned** from the department over several similar incidents.

The judge ordered the department to review the sage grouse decision, which led to Friday’s announcement.

A group of lawmakers from Western states had strongly urged Mr. Salazar to keep the sage grouse off the endangered species list, saying that the states had made significant progress in protecting its habitat. They said adding the bird to the list would hurt ranchers and energy producers who need access to sagebrush-covered lands that would be off limits under the listing.

“Today’s unnecessary federal designation is one more on a growing list of examples that this administration places environmental special interests before job creation,” Representative **Rob Bishop**, Republican of Utah, said Friday.

“Not only is today’s announcement a direct attack on the hundreds of Western communities that depend on access to federal lands for ranching, livestock, mining and energy production, it also could potentially destroy opportunities for development of our renewable resources,” he said.

Representative **Jason Chaffetz**, another Utah Republican, has been more pungent in his opinion. “The only good place for a sage grouse to be listed is on the menu of a French bistro,” he said recently. “It does not deserve federal protection, period.”

Brian Rutledge, Rocky Mountain regional director for the **Audubon Society**, said he agreed with Mr. Salazar that other species were facing greater danger. But he said he hoped the decision to make the sage grouse a candidate for endangered species protection would mean that state and

federal agencies would act much more aggressively to protect the bird's threatened habitat.

"We've already achieved 50 percent total destruction of the sagebrush ecosystem and a large part of what's left we've seriously compromised," he said. "We have been told clearly that the science tells us this bird is in trouble. This is an absolute straightforward clarion call for us to pull together to save it."

As for Mr. Chaffetz's suggestion, Mr. Rutledge said: "All I can say is he never tasted a sage grouse; they taste horrible. It's like eating sagebrush."

Asked how he knew that, Mr. Rutledge responded, "Anecdotally."

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