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THE BETRAYAL OF THE SAGE-GROUSE POPULATION!

In 2010, the "U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service" (FWS) considered listing the birds under the "Endangered Species Act"! Energy companies, ranchers, and, private landowners, wary of the restrictions on development that a listing would bring, spent years working with conservationists, states, and, federal agencies, to create management plans that allowed continued development, but, steered it away from core areas where sage-grouse mate, nest, and, overwinter! Those plans-the result of the single largest planning effort the "BLM" has undertaken-were officially adopted in 2015!

Based on the safeguards for sage-grouse in those earlier management blueprints, "FWS" determined that the birds did not need protection under the "Endangered Species Act"! But, last year, in keeping with his ongoing campaign to open more federal land to energy development, former "Interior Secretary", Ryan Zinke announced he was revisiting those plans! That led to today's amended versions, which undermine that certainty, and, deepen concerns about the stability of sage-grouse populations!

Among other pro-industry provisions, the plans would remove a requirement that any sagebrush habitat damaged by development be offset with restoration projects elsewhere, instead leaving it to states to enforce that mandate! In Utah, and, parts of Wyoming, they would no longer prioritize areas outside sage-grouse habitat for oil, and, gas, development. And, Rutledge says, they would trade a landscape approach to protection-one that reflects the bird's need for sweeping, un-fragmented habitat-for a piecemeal approach that only considers the local footprint of development!

In a June letter to Zinke, scientists with expertise on sagebrush ecosystems cautioned that the draft plans' shift away from landscape-scale protection was risky. "Failure to take into account large-scale dynamics when managing sage-grouse will likely lead to an overall loss of habitat quantity and quality resulting in population declines," they wrote!

The energy industry welcomed the news! Today's amendments "are a big improvement on the 2015 plans," according to the Western Energy Alliance, which represents more than 300 oil and gas companies. "Unlike with the previous plans, companies that enact rigorous protections for the species will be able to move forward with development," said Kathleen Sgamma, the group's president, in a statement to Audubon magazine.

Still, the "National Audubon Society" was not alone in criticizing today's announcement! "In announcing these changes, former Secretary Zinke was breaking a compromise deal made just three years ago by Westerners of all stripes, who set aside their differences to conserve key sage-grouse habitat and provide certainty for communities, and, industry, around the region," said Jesse Prentice-Dunn, policy director at the Center for Western Priorities, in a statement.

Whit Fosburgh, president and CEO of the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, issued a more measured statement. "These new plans are a mixed bag, with some changes addressing legitimate requests from the states to help align with their conservation approaches and other changes stripping back protections for core sage grouse habitat, and, creating more uncertainty for the West," he said.

That uncertainty could ultimately ensnare even those who stand to gain in the short term from Interior's industry-friendly approach! When the Obama administration opted not to add Greater Sage-Grouse to the endangered list, "that decision was utterly dependent on these promises, these certainties delivered by the 2015 plans," Rutledge says. With those assurances out the window, the next time sage-grouse numbers bottom out-they're known for boom and bust population cycles-it could trigger a listing, and, heavier restrictions on land development, including oil and gas leases. It is a possibility as bad for business as it is for birds!