

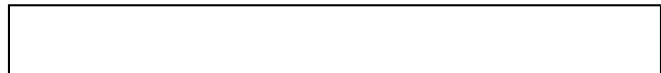
## Renewable energy development linked to sage grouse protection

### Agencies trying to keep bird off endangered list

By Kate Ramsayer / *The Bulletin*

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Balancing renewable energy development with sage grouse protection — and keeping the birds off the endangered species list — drew about 140 people to a symposium in Bend on Tuesday.



The meeting, held by the Renewable Energy and Eastern Oregon Landscape Partnership, came as the state of Oregon considers new recommendations on how to protect sage grouse, and the Bureau of Land Management has developed a map showing possible conflicts with renewable energy in Eastern Oregon.

In March 2009, Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar challenged the BLM to go forward with renewable energy development, while still protecting and enhancing the natural resources on public lands, said Mike Haske, deputy state director for resources with the Oregon and Washington BLM.

“We can’t take on this task by ourselves, and that’s the challenge before this group today,” Haske said.

Speakers representing different agencies and outlooks spoke during the daylong symposium and answered questions from the audience.

Christian Hagen, sage grouse conservation coordinator with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, gave an overview of proposed revisions to the state’s sage grouse strategy. The Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission will consider the proposal at an upcoming meeting.

The new conservation strategy is based on “core areas,” he said, which are areas of primary importance to sage grouse as winter range or breeding grounds. In those key areas, the state would recommend no development that would damage habitat.

In less essential habitat, the state would recommend that developers who disturb the sagebrush ecosystems make up for the damage.

The goal, he said, is not only to protect 90 percent of the breeding population, but also to keep the animals off of the federal endangered species list.

Although counties aren’t required to follow the state’s recommendations in siting renewable energy facilities, if the birds are listed it could trigger strict federal regulations, and possibly open practices like grazing up to lawsuits.

“The incentive has been, we need to keep federal regulation out of the sage grouse issue,” Hagen said.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recently determined that while sage grouse are “warranted but precluded,” which means the population is in enough trouble to be on the endangered species list, there are other species of greater concern at this time.

At Tuesday’s symposium, Haske also talked about a new map the BLM developed, which has multiple layers illustrating where different natural resource issues, like pygmy rabbit habitat or mule deer winter range, could cause complications for renewable energy developers.

“We’re trying to help folks better understand what they can expect when they go to a given area,” he said.

Brent Fenty, executive director of the Oregon Natural Desert Association, told the audience there should be a focus on the cumulative impacts of renewable energy projects. Land managers need to consider what will happen with the ecosystems due to climate change and wildfires in the future, he said, and should also consider permanent protection for some key habitat areas.

“At some point, we have to accept some level of impacts,” he said. “The key is to reduce the impacts that are out there.”

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