

HOW THE WEST WAS LOST

Two conservation challenges facing the American West could dramatically alter the western way of life. One is the result of human development in the West and the other is the result of a misguided public policy proposal that would transfer or sell our public lands. Both challenges are bellwethers of our resolve to conserve the western landscape for its lifestyle and for future generations.

Ranching and farming operations, energy development, invasive species, roads, transmission lines, and wildfires threaten the long-term survival of the greater sage-grouse. By law, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) must decide if it is necessary to provide protection for the species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Congress has temporarily halted that decision but it will be made at some point in time. This decision will hinge on five factors: 1) the condition of the species' habitat, 2) the use of the species for commercial, recreational, and scientific purposes, 3) the impact of disease and predation, 4) the adequacy of regulatory mechanisms to protect the species and its habitat now and into the future, and 5) other manmade or natural factors that may affect the future existence of the species.

There are concerns about the listing of sage-grouse under the ESA and its potential impact on the economy and on individuals' ability to operate land the way they would like—the concerns are real. However, these concerns

cannot be considered when making a listing decision. When the FWS makes its decision, it must be based on the best available scientific information with respect to the five factors enumerated above. Stated another way, the FWS must consider the species' relative threat of extinction based on the ecology of the bird and its habitat. Legally, the FWS cannot reach a listing decision based on popular or political opinions nor on economic considerations. The ESA language does not address those issues nor does the judicial system take them into account when ruling on a challenge to a listing decision.

State fish and wildlife agencies, the Bureau of Land Management, the Forest Service, and private landowners have developed conservation plans that should improve the species' survival. More than a decade ago, the FWS developed the Policy for the Evaluation of Conservation Efforts (PECE). This relatively little-known policy does allow the FWS to consider conservation plans when making a listing decision. The importance of the PECE and conservation planning cannot be overstated. As opposed to considering only current conservation efforts and current habitat conditions, the FWS recognized that future commitments to conservation might improve the status of species and its habitat. Not surprisingly, in order for the FWS to seriously consider conservation plans, they must be effective and implementable. That is, the plans must lead to sage-grouse numbers improving and they must

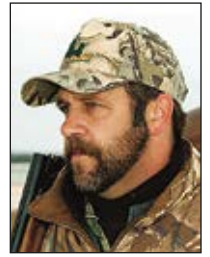
be carried out into the future. PECE provides the FWS an opportunity to consider what would be done correctly in the future even if it has not been done correctly in the past.

Ultimately, the FWS will have to decide if the cumulative effect of all conservation efforts—current and future—will enhance the survival of the species. These analyses and decisions will be based on biology, but they are constrained and measured by the judicial system. A decision one way or the other, which cannot be successfully defended in a court of law, is a waste of money, time, and effort. It won't be easy, but we can conserve sage-grouse and the multitude of other species that inhabit sagebrush habitat and continue to ranch, farm, and develop energy.

In striking contrast to the court-mandated decision on sage-grouse, some federal and state legislators have proposed the transfer and/or sale of portions of the 640 million-acre federal land system to state governments for their management. Nothing

So much is changing in this hectic and increasingly developed world it is nice to know that there is still solitude and strength in the western landscapes. Selling off land to make ideological statements and not improving sage-grouse populations are insults to those who fought so mightily to establish and protect our conservation legacy.

CAPITOL COMMENTS



Steven Williams, Ph.D.
B&C PROFESSIONAL MEMBER
PRESIDENT
Wildlife Management Institute

mandated this proposal except for ideology, but its potential implications for western landscapes and way of life could be dramatic. These lands require funds for operation, management, and enforcement. Where would states acquire that additional money? Furthermore, it is hard to imagine that cash-strapped state budgets would be better able to address the “maintenance backlog” (often quoted as the reason not to acquire new federal lands) than the federal government.

Congress should demonstrate business sense and invest funds in infrastructure improvements on public lands. The return on investment is measurable and significant. Often derided by federal, state, and local governments, public lands have proven to stimulate local economies at little or no



© MARK MESSINKO

cost to local businesses. In addition, they could even create jobs for rural communities by investing in maintenance and capital improvements on federal lands.

My concern is not BLM lands that lie within the city limits of Las Vegas or small tracts whose transfer would reduce operational expenses for federal agencies. Nor do I object to land transfers that enhance management and access to other federal lands. My concern is the transfer or sale of lands that are of commercial interest to states and private investors.

If federal lands are better managed at the state level, then following that logic, the next argument would be that they would be even better managed in local and private hands. It is not dishonest to assume that the most valuable of these lands—those that produce timber, forage, water, or minerals - would eventually be auctioned to private interests. This may be fine for states that want to generate one-time revenue and wonderful for wealthy investors. There are numerous examples of wealthy individuals, some of whom are foreign to this country, who

bought large tracts of land to secure it for their own private use or to subdivide it into “ranchettes.”

The intersection of these two issues may result in the loss of parts of the American West and of the western way of life. Hunters, anglers, ranchers, farmers, energy developers, tourists, local economies, and on and on have a significant stake in these issues. So much is changing in this hectic and increasingly developed world it is nice to know that there is still solitude and strength in the western landscapes. Selling off land to

make ideological statements and not improving sage-grouse populations are insults to those who fought so mightily to establish and protect our conservation legacy. The Boone and Crockett Club was instrumental in establishing National Parks, National Forests, and federal public lands. We'd better be instrumental in standing tall to protect them and the species that rely on them. ■

Leica

**Conceived in Germany.
Born in the USA.**

Introducing: Leica ER 5 Series Riflescopes

We've taken all that's great about Leica's world-renowned German engineering, optical performance, and mechanical precision and created an all-new riflescope lineup, specifically for the demands of the North American hunter. Six models, from the close-quarters 1-5x24 to the long range 5-25x56, each loaded with an extended 5:1 zoom ratio, 4-inch eye relief at all magnifications, extended windage and elevation adjustment range, a wide variety of reticles, and much more.

Find out more at leica-sportoptics.com or visit your Leica dealer.

NEW!

Leica ER 5 models: 1-5x24 | 1.5-8x32 | 2-10x50 | 3-15x56 | 4-20x50 | 5-25x56