

CAPITOL COMMENTS

Will Public Participation Protect our Interest in Wildlife?



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Across the West a new push for less government and more local input is now going past rhetoric and taking either a giant step for conserving habitats and wildlife or posing a huge risk to our resources. Those interested in wildlife — hunters, professional wildlife managers, and conservation interests like the Boone and Crockett Club — must be at the table to influence decisions that affect our interests.

In the midst of the energy boom on the Pinedale Anticline in Wyoming, a unique experiment is under way. A formal committee has been charged by the Secretary of the Interior to make recommendations to the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) about how to monitor and protect wildlife, air quality, water quality, social and economic values, and more. More than 90 people have volunteered for 7 different Task Groups, such as monitoring effects on wildlife. Development has already exceeded the predicted size and scope, and substantial resource values have been reduced or lost. Yet this citizen-based effort has an opportunity to shape how development proceeds.

What is it citizens are being asked to do and what will it take to keep them involved? Participation may include travel, frequent meetings, understanding highly technical issues, meeting times that overlap normal working hours, and perhaps waiting a lifetime to see actual results. These volunteers are there solely because they have a personal interest in the outcome, and they must work alongside others who are paid to represent specific interests. Many of the things they are being asked to do are things we thought professionals in the agencies should do — a situation that bears watching.

What will probably determine continuing participation is outcomes. If months of hard work produce recommendations for state and federal agencies, the expectation will be to see monitoring studies to establish cause and effect and changes in land practices or operations. A realistic concern about this new approach to resource planning is that if citizens put in the effort to develop ideas that can help, but there is no money provided nor any change in project operations, why would those citizens volunteer again?

No representatives of major hunting/conservation organizations volunteered to work on the Pinedale Anticline planning process, yet the outcome will affect world-

ly expanding energy development have reduced the number of birds by half.

The first thrust to list the sage grouse as a regulatory solution has been rejected by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Even though some conclude that the listing bullet has been dodged, and the feared disruption of such activities as grazing and energy development will not happen, unless we really change how land is used across sage grouse range — a huge area — future listing, and the disruption that comes with it, is likely.

The Western Governors' Association says it intends to keep working to avoid listing. Conservation organizations like the North American Grouse Partnership are dedicated to the tasks of conserving the birds and their habitats. The Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies has completed a comprehensive 700-page science-based review of the status of sage grouse and their habitats as a foundation. BLM has a new sage grouse plan.

At the core of this hope for a different future for sage grouse are 60 local sage-grouse working groups in 11 states, with involvement by more than 500 private landowners. Some groups have years of experience, but most have been formed more recently. The job they are expected to do is complex and long-term: to deal with the peculiarities of sage grouse

and its harsh environment and mediate between the needs of the bird and the human desire to produce livestock, energy, new housing, and other commodities from the sage habitat.

Similar needs for extensive participation are driving planning processes for National Forests and

National Wildlife Refuges. In my experience, the hunting/conservation community is seldom involved for the long-term work, but those who view National Forests as potential parks, and who don't support hunting on Wildlife Refuges, are there in force.

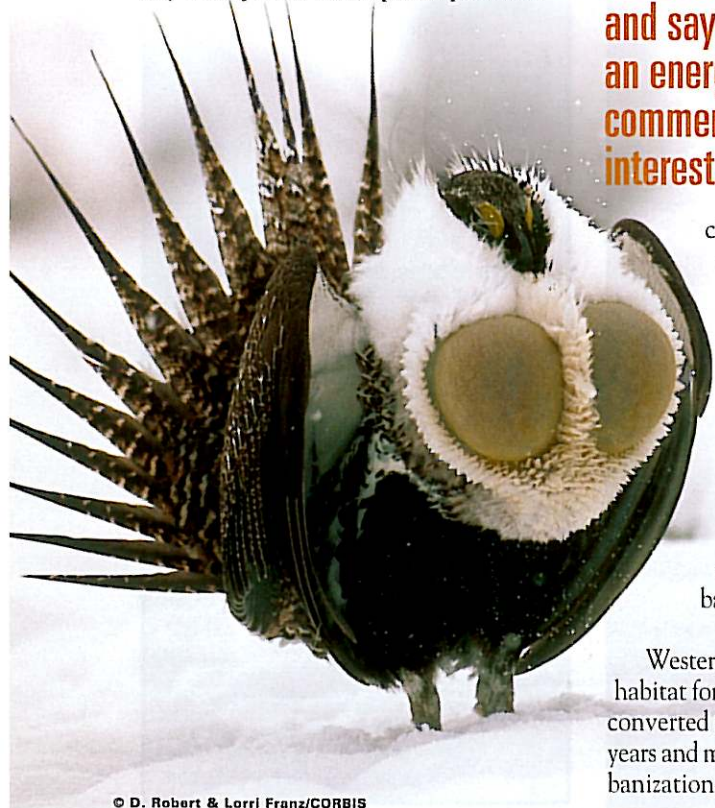
The Club has historical experience in the need to balance public input — remember the fight to save Yellowstone from commercial exploitation? Left to their own devices, "local interests" often may focus more on their own "wants" than on broader values to society. When a person appears at the table and says, "I represent agriculture or an energy company or a chamber of commerce," can we assume our interests in wildlife will be protected?

I suggest we need to be there ourselves to provide that balance. ■

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class mule deer and pronghorn hunting in the Green River Basin and Wind River and Wyoming mountain ranges. Both local and national environmental groups are present, as are agricultural and energy interests, and citizens with a personal interest in wildlife, and other issues. The Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership offered help, and recruited five people who will help balance the wildlife effort.

In another case, across the 11 Western states and into Canada, half the habitat for sage grouse is gone and has been converted to other uses. During the past 100 years and more, drought, grazing pressure, urbanization, invasive weeds, and now rapid-



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