

A conversation with the Fish and Wildlife Service
By Larry Hyslop



Ted Koch of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Ted Koch is the Nevada State Supervisor for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). I originally asked him what would happen if the Greater Sage-grouse becomes listed as an endangered species. Much of our conversation, however, centered on events occurring during the next two years before a decision will be made.

“We don’t see grazing as one of the major threats to the Sage-grouse,” he said. There might need to be more residual vegetation, or stubble height, left after grazing on some federal land, and other restrictions might be needed in other specific areas, but there will be no blanket changes affecting everywhere.

Wet meadows and springs are vitally important to Sage-grouse, but appropriately managed grazing of such areas help the bird. Only when wet meadows have been overgrazed would changes in grazing be necessary.

Rumors have been floating around that the USFWS would somehow specify how ranchers manage their private land. Ted said theoretically, the only possible regulation of private land concerns taking of excess birds, something that is not a problem in Nevada. Besides, far too much federally-managed rangelands are available to worry about. The USFWS has been much more successful working with private land owners cooperatively, working with ranchers to develop projects to improve Sage-grouse habitat on private lands.

“We are very concerned with the impact of wild horses on Sage-grouse habitat,” Ted said. He added the agency is also concerned with the impact of wild horses on grazing operators.

Existing mines are not likely to be impacted by listing the bird, since disturbance to the land has already occurred. New mines created in prime Sage-grouse habitat will be a problem. Destruction of such habitat would need to be avoided or mitigated by completing habitat improvements elsewhere. Ted is working with the Nevada Mining Association to build a plan for future mine work while protecting Sage-grouse habitat.

Easily, the gravest threat to Sage-grouse habitat is wildfire and proliferation of cheat-grass, a threat much greater than grazing or mining. He stressed the idea that we all need to work together to reduce these threats and hopefully, stave off listing the bird. Rehabilitating a burned area by planting non-

native vegetation might help reduce fire danger and compete with cheat-grass, but will not help Sage-grouse.

“We all agree that predation is an increasing threat to Sage-grouse,” he said. The raven population has increased 600% in areas and the USFWS has authorized Nevada to kill 2,000 birds this year. He emphasized that if we only talk about poisoning ravens, we will fail to control their numbers. He gave five ways to control ravens that should come before killing, 1) control their access to dumps, 2) control their access to road kills, 3) reduce artificial nesting sites on towers, 4) stop the practice of shooting ground squirrels and leaving the bodies, and 5) provide adequate vegetation as nesting cover for Sage-grouse.

“We have a lot in common on what we can do to work together.” During the next two years, the USFWS will be working with the BLM, US Forest Service, the state of Nevada, the Nevada Department of Wildlife, the Nevada Mining Association, and private land owners to determine what sort of procedures need to be in place to protect the bird and keep it from being listed. Ted said the next two years offers all of us a chance to try solutions and come up with ways to help the Sage-grouse.

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