

Matt Knox,
Board of Directors, Fergus County Farm Bureau
representing

Montana Farm Bureau Federation

Before the House Natural Resources Committee Field Hearing on
“State and Local Efforts to Protect Species, Jobs, Property, and Multiple Use Amidst a New War
on the West”.

September 4, 2013

Chairman Hastings, Congressman Daines and members of the Natural Resources Committee.
My name is Matt Knox, and I want to thank you for the opportunity to testify today on “*State
and Local Efforts to Protect Species, Jobs, Property, and Multiple Use Amidst a New War on the
West*”.

I ranch in north central Montana in the Missouri Breaks with my wife Karla and daughters Sally
and Sarah. Currently I serve on the Board of Directors of Fergus County Farm Bureau and also
represent the Missouri River Stewards, an organization dedicated to protecting ranching in the
Missouri river breaks.

Today I am testifying on behalf of the Montana Farm Bureau.

I would like to talk specifically about Sage Grouse, the real threats to the species, misdirected
conservation efforts by the BLM, Montana’s developing sage grouse management plan and end
with a few comments on the Endangered Species Act in general.

Montana has a viable and stable sage grouse population. As such any efforts at conservation
should be aimed at continuation of current efforts. Bird numbers tend to vary due to weather
patterns, predation, disease, wildfire and sage brush conversion. These are very real threats to
the survival of sage grouse and should not be confused with misdirected conservation measures.
Among these misdirected measures are several that are listed in the BLM’s national strategy to
protect sage grouse. They were developed by the National Technical Team (NTT) whose main
interest it seems is to restrict or eliminate land uses that in fact pose little or no threat to grouse.
Some of the measures are predicated on the assumption that livestock grazing is associated with
sage grouse population loss. This ignores the parallel decline over the past half century of both
livestock numbers and sage grouse on public lands. In 1953, there was approximately 18 million
animal unit months (AUM) s on BLM land in the west, by 2000 that number was around 10
million AUMs. If grazing were the problem, sage grouse should be flourishing. Sage grouse
management and grazing management share a common objective of healthy native rangeland
vegetation, which is as important to range livestock production as it is to sage grouse. Retiring
grazing privileges as suggested by the BLM is based on political antagonism far more than real
biology. It is amazing to our members that grazing by cattle is a threat but overgrazing by wild
horses or wildlife has no effect in the eyes of the BLM.

Another misdirected conservation measure is the management of wildfire by the BLM. The
national strategy suggests managing fire by Minimum Impact Suppression Tactics (MIST). It
doesn’t take a long memory to recall the devastation to sage grouse habitat during the 2012 fire
season. Rangeland fire in sage grouse habitat should be attacked immediately and aggressively.

Predation continues to be ignored by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as a factor in sage grouse decline. Their response to questions on predation continues to be; it may be a rare localized issue but adequate habitat is the real problem. In the early 1900's sage grouse numbers began to grow as ranchers and farmers controlled coyotes, skunks, crows and ravens. The trend continued into the 1960's when efforts to control predators were curtailed through government regulation. An example is a very aggressive nest predator, the raven whose population in the west has grown by over 1000% since 1900. Predators are a factor and any effort to conserve the species needs to address the issue.

At the request of the livestock and oil and gas industry, Governor Bullock appointed a sage grouse advisory committee to develop a management plan for sage grouse in Montana. The plan must pass muster with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service thus keeping the bird from being listed. As mentioned above there is abundant data proving that grazing and sage grouse are very compatible uses. That applies not only to grazing, but to water development, irrigation and other developments within reasonable distances from active leks. Therefore we suggest that Montana follow the Wyoming example of exempting traditional agricultural practices. The livestock and oil and gas industries have put a great deal of time and effort in this effort as well as hundreds of hours of state legislator and agency employee hours. These hours will have been wasted and the reputation of the entire ESA tarnished even further if, as Director Dan Ashe stated at a recent Farm Bureau gathering in Washington D.C. that he was 90% certain that sage grouse will be listed no matter what the states develop as management strategies.

This brings us to the crux of the problem, the Endangered Species Act itself. It is not working very well. In fact since its passage over 13,000 species of plants and animals have been listed. Depending on whose numbers you use, anywhere between 7- 20 species have been removed from the list. Of those removed, most had little or nothing to do with the act but dealt with species already extinct or recovered by some other means. This leaves the ESA with a success percentage of around .06 percent. Cost is another factor of the equation. Some examples of costs compiled by the Political Economy Research Center (PERC) in Bozeman Montana are

- Delay of a \$55 million high school in California while waiting for ESA determination on fairy shrimp. Cost \$1 million.
- The subcommittee on Forest and Forest Health reported that 130,000 jobs were lost and more than 900 sawmills, paper and pulp mills were closed because of the spotted owl.
- Farmers in the Klamath Basin lost crops valued at \$53 million because irrigation water was shut off in 2001 to protect 2 fish species.
- \$100 million spent on Prebles Jumping Mouse which wasn't even a unique species.

The definition of critical habitat has wandered far afield. The current definition now fits better for those who would seek wide spread land use control than for those who would preserve a species. "Critical habitat" is not defined as land on which the species currently lives, but as any area that has characteristics essential to the survival of the species. A piece of property may be designated "critical habitat" if a species might have lived there or could possibly live there some time in the future.

Endangered designations lack verifiable peer reviewed scientific evidence. According to Dr. J. Gordon Edwards, San Jose State University in “The Handbook of Environmental Science Health & Technology”, scientists around the world have recognized that biological species must be reproductively isolated and genetically distinctive natural populations. This scientific categorization of species bears no resemblance to the political use of the word in the ESA. In fact Edwards claims detailed records reveal 40% of species listed on the ESA to be only sub-species or distinct populations. Among these is the Florida panther, Eastern timber wolf, Columbian white tail deer and the infamous Northern spotted owl.

In closing, Montana Farmers and Ranchers are extremely frustrated with the Endangered Species Act. It is like a treadmill to landowners and producers. We spend an inordinate amount of time and effort in order to keep species from being listed, only to have them listed anyway. Once listed, delisting goals are moving targets. When delisting targets are reached delisting is further delayed by court cases. Habitat control takes precedence over species conservation. Conservation of one species leads to degradation of another. The sage grouse is on center stage at this time, before that it was the wolf, cutthroat trout and grizzly bears to name a few. When we start playing god to one species there is no place to stop until the federal government controls the entire west.