

# House bills puts 10-year hold on sage grouse listing

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS  
Capital Press

Ranchers won a legislative round in the greater sage grouse saga on Friday when a defense bill passed the U.S. House with a provision delaying an endangered species listing of the bird for 10 years.

Preventing a listing of the bird is a top priority for Public Lands Council and National Cattlemen's Beef Association and will remain a priority along with working to modernize the Endangered Species Act, said Dustin Van Liew, executive director of PLC and NCBA

federal lands.

The FY 2016 National Defense Authorization Act containing the species measures passed 169-151, with about 40 Democrats joining all House Republicans. The ESA content was focused on disruption of military operations on military installations in or near species habitat, he said.

The Senate committee mark-up of its version of the defense bill does not contain the measures, but amendments could be introduced on the floor when the bill is heard or negotiated in conference, he said.

PLC and NCBA will be working with senators to

communicate the detrimental effects of a species listing and the benefits of grazing and keeping open space intact to protect habitat, he said.

Any time a species is listed, it brings restrictions on land and water use that affect ranchers, such as when, where and if grazing allowed, he said.

Sage grouse habitat spans 11 Western states and encompasses 186 million acres of federal and private land.

A listing would not only destroy the ranching industry in the West, the backbone of many rural communities, it would also halt conservation efforts underway by ranch-

ers, said Idaho rancher Brenda Richards, PLC president and NCBA member.

"Ranchers in particular have consistently lived and operated in harmony with the sage grouse for many decades and, in fact, the core habitat areas are thriving largely due to a long history of well-managed grazing," she said.

In addition to delaying a listing, language in the bill would put state-approved management plans into place for at least five years — ensuring states have an integral role in sage-grouse management.

A listing would impact ranchers, on the ground and

in court rooms. Ranchers in the Great Plains are already feeling the negative impact of last year's threatened listing of the lesser prairie chicken, Van Liew said.

The defense bill also includes language to reverse and prohibit a listing of the lesser prairie chicken as either threatened or endangered until 2021.

In addition to delaying any sage grouse listing, the bill blocks federal land-use decisions that exceed state management plans, Van Liew said.

PLC and NCBA are already seeing U.S. Bureau of Land Management plans that

would go beyond even Fish and Wildlife Service plans, he said.

For example, one such plan would require a plant stubble height of 6 inches, which is not attainable in some areas of the West even without cattle grazing, he said.

That arbitrary stubble height is both "threatening and laughable," and a testimony to the importance of leaving management to the states instead of a federal one-size-fits-all approach, he said.

"It remains a priority for us to keep wildlife decisions as close to the ground as pos-

# Ag a key economic player in Columbia River Gorge

By ERIC MORTENSON  
Capital Press

HOOD RIVER, Ore. — Agriculture is a major economic influence in the Columbia River Gorge counties, panelists said at a May 14 conference, and Oregon's Sherman County is a prime example.

"Sherman County can lead the state in terms of earnings per capita or it can be at the bottom, depending on what commodity prices are doing," said Dallas Fridley, a regional economist with the Oregon Employment Department.

In 2013, thanks mainly to good wheat prices, per capita personal income in the county was \$57,738, while other gorge counties ranged from \$38,000 to \$40,000, Fridley said.

The income figures were among the information nuggets distributed during the Columbia Gorge Economic Symposium. Panelists said agriculture and as-

sociated activities such as food processing are key components of the mid-Columbia economy. The event examined prospects in Hood River, Wasco and Sherman counties in Oregon, and Klickitat and Skamania counties in Washington. In the region, the natural resource sector, which includes agriculture, provides 18 percent of jobs but only 12 percent of wages, speakers said.

Mike Glover, executive director of the Hood River County Chamber of Commerce, said the organization wants to make agriculture and value-added agriculture — such as wineries and distilleries — a bigger part of the county's tourism draw. The annual "Fruit Loop" celebration, which encourages visitors to see the valley's orchards, has been a successful event for years, he said.

"We want to soften the seasonality of it, we want to provide year-round employment," he said.



Eric Mortenson/Capital Press

Oregon economists Nick Beleiciks, left, and Dallas Fridley described agriculture's impact in the Columbia River Gorge at a May 14 symposium in Hood River.

Given the breweries, wineries and cider makers springing up in the area, Glover said the gorge could use a fermentation science education program.

The chamber also is concerned that rising real estate prices in Hood River put housing out of reach for workers, Glover said.

"As we look down the pike

we don't want to make Hood River so popular that we love it to death and people can't afford to live here," he said.

Ken Bailey, an orchardist based in Wasco County, said his farm employment has almost doubled in the past five years. Technological changes will require additional training for workers, especially in packing

houses as machines take over sorting and sizing duties, he said.

Drone technology is poised to take off when the FAA gives full flight approval, with agriculture and law enforcement likely to be the first users of unmanned aerial vehicles, said Jessica Metta, executive director of the Columbia River Gorge Technology Alliance. Insitu Inc., which makes drone aircraft for military and other uses, is based in Bingen, Wash. and has attracted associated businesses to the area.

Overall, the economies in Oregon and Washington has largely recovered jobs lost during the recession and are keeping pace with national expansion, state economists said.

Oregon's unemployment rate was 5.4 percent in March, compared to the national rate of 5.5 percent, said Nick Beleiciks, a workforce trend expert with the Oregon Employment Department. The last time Oregon had a better rate than the national rate was 1996, he said.

"The labor market's doing really well," Beleiciks said. "I'm not sure everyone is getting that message."

# Cover crop company faces \$4.85 million in farmer liens

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI  
Capital Press

Several Oregon farms have filed crop liens against an out-of-state seed company they claim is past due on more than \$1.5 million in payments for radish seed.

Other growers whose contractual payment dates are still upcoming have also filed liens against Cover Crop Solutions, based in Pennsylvania, bringing the total to 35 grain producers liens worth \$4.85 million.

"I don't know of any small business owners in Oregon that can take that kind of hit for an extended period of time. It's a scary situation," said Anna Scharf of Scharf Farms, which filed a \$250,000 lien against the firm. "When we're asked to be the banker, it's hard for farmers."

David Weaver, CEO of Cover Crop Solutions, said he could not yet discuss the situation but would soon respond to a request for comment from Capital Press.

Jim Gardner of K&J Farms, which filed a \$97,000 lien, said his family is relatively new to producing radish seed but it was a major crop for their operation last year.

"I haven't seen a penny and I need to pay people," he said.

The uncertainty over payments from Cover Crop Solutions will probably make farmers think twice about growing radish seed, Gardner said. "A farmer can't grow something for nothing."

A recent oversupply in the market for radish seed, which is planted as a cover crop, was aggravated by weather in the Midwest last year, said Gary Weaver, president of Weaver Seed of Oregon.

A wet spring in 2014 delayed the planting and harvest of corn and soybeans, which left many farmers in that region with insufficient time to plant cover crops in autumn, he said.

Seed producers in Oregon's Willamette Valley also overestimated demand for radish seed, Weaver said. "The whole valley planted too many acres."

However, the oversupply is likely to ease over the next 18 months as seed companies work through their inventories, he said.

Gardner of K&J Farms said that growers file liens because they're nervous about an eventuality similar to the bankruptcy

of Agribiotech, which defaulted on contracts with grass seed farmers in 2000.

"I think it opened a lot of farmers' eyes about what they need to do to protect themselves," he said.

In a bankruptcy, liens ensure that farmers are treated as secured creditors who have collateral in the company's assets, said Tim Bernasek, an Oregon attorney specializing in agriculture.

"Being first in line to get paid enhances your ability to get paid," Bernasek said.

Under a grain producer's lien, a company's entire inventory serves as collateral for the grower — not just the crop he delivered, said John Albert, an Oregon attorney who specializes in agricultural liens.

Farmers therefore don't have to show the company still has possession of their crop, he said.

"That makes it a pretty powerful tool in the hands of a grower," Albert said.

However, grain producers liens aren't effective indefinitely, since they expire after six months.



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