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Idaho

State sues Interior, USDA over sage grouse plans

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS
Capital Press

Western officials and public lands ranchers hailed Interior Secretary Sally Jewell's announcement last week that listing greater sage grouse for protection under the Endangered Species Act is not warranted.

But the jubilation in Idaho was soured by 11th-hour amendments to federal land-management plans that impose what Idaho's governor and Legislature contend are unprecedented and unnecessary restrictions on sage grouse habitat.

Gov. Butch Otter and the Legislature filed suit on Friday in U.S. District Court in

Washington, D.C., for declaratory and injunctive relief for multiple violations of federal law by U.S. Department of the Interior and U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Otter agrees with the "not warranted" determination on sage grouse, but the problem is the administrative rules the agencies have adopted are in some ways worse than a listing, said Jon Hanian, Otter's press secretary.

"They severely limit human activity on 10 million acres or more across the region," he said.

The agencies finalized amendments to 64 land-use plans for federally managed lands in six states, including

Idaho, in a flawed process by Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service, the suit contends.

That process lacked transparency, analysis and public vetting of the new restrictions, the plaintiffs contend.

The decision that a listing for sage grouse is unwarranted is the result of many years of collaborative effort by 11 western states, resource industries, conservation communities, private land owners, and federal agencies.

But the federal agencies undermined that effort with a last-minute, clandestine effort to develop a national solution that includes new and tougher restrictions, Otter stated in a

press release.

"For months now, the federal government's initially transparent and collaborative process has been replaced by closed-door meetings and internal memoranda," he said.

After all the work and effort that stakeholders put into the process, with the feeling that the agencies were listening and acting upon that input, the agencies' final actions are troubling and disheartening, Hanian said.

He said the new land-use rules ignore all that work and divert limited resources away from the main threats to sage grouse — wildfire and invasive species, such as cheatgrass. Instead, the agencies are looking

to curb secondary threats, such as grazing and mining.

Idaho's lawsuit claims the agencies violated the National Environmental Policy Act, National Forest Management Act, Federal Land Policy and Management Act, and Administrative Procedure Act.

It further claims the agencies unlawfully designated 3.4 million acres in Idaho as areas of critical environmental concern and 236,800 acres in Idaho as recreation areas; violated congressional mandate to manage public lands for multiple use and sustained yield; and unlawfully abdicated legal authority to Fish and Wildlife Service.

Interior Department

spokeswoman Jessica Kershaw said the agency can't comment on pending litigation but responded in the following written statement:

"The BLM-USFS plans follow the best available science and were developed collaboratively with state and local partners. We believe the plans are both balanced and effective — protecting key sage-grouse habitat and providing for sustainable development.

"The plans are critical to the FWS determination that the greater sage-grouse does not need the protection of the Endangered Species Act, and we look forward to implementing them in collaboration with states and stakeholders."

Ag economist tells farmers to seek new opportunities

UI alum addresses Idaho, international trade possibilities

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

MOSCOW, Idaho — Farmers need to think outside the box and look for additional opportunities for their crops, says a University of Idaho graduate who now works for the USDA Foreign Agricultural Service.

Lee Schatz, an agricultural economist with FAS, spoke on the UI campus as part of the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences' Ag Days program to recruit high school students into agricultural careers.

Schatz spoke on several subjects during a press conference Sept. 24 on the organic farm site.

On the biggest need he sees in agriculture: "Understanding a change in the markets." Idaho was only two to three crops when Schatz was a student at UI, but he pointed to increased bean production. Schatz cited the Pacific Northwest Farmers Cooperative's work as a chickpea supplier for Sabra's hummus production, finding a use for undersized chickpeas.

Hummus has increased in popularity, giving Idaho area farmers an opportunity for another cash crop, Schatz said.

"When push comes to shove, we're exporting no more wheat, corn or barley than we were a generation ago," he said. "If a farmer can take part of his fields that are good for some of these specialty crops, maybe he's got a few acres that will do better than these traditional crops around here."

Schatz recommended farmers be tuned in to demand and find new venues they have yet to try.



Matthew Weaver/Capital Press

USDA Foreign Agricultural Service agricultural economist Lee Schatz speaks to members of the media Sept. 24 at the University of Idaho's Soil Stewards student club's organic garden in Moscow, Idaho. Schatz spoke as part of the UI College of Agricultural and Life Sciences' Ag Days program.

"There's more than just the elevator to sell at now," he said.

Idaho's sustained a consistent presence in international markets, compared to other states, Schatz said.

"Their products are known out there — they've got a good name, good reputation," he said. "It's going to be harder and harder with commodities over time, because we are not the least-cost producer."

Many countries are buying product just to feed their populations, and not worrying about the quality of the crop coming in, he said.

"We have to keep dissect-

ing those markets as they come along," he said.

On gradual acceptance of genetically modified wheat: Schatz has been waiting for a trait that would provide nutrition benefits or drought tolerance, emphasizing the benefits to customers over the benefits to farmers. "Then we're going to start seeing the debate shift," he said.

Advice to students: They have a world of opportunity awaiting them, Schatz said.

"To understand the international component is to better understand the complexity of even our own market," he said.

Officials learn from trap crop escape, make fixes

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

SHELLEY, Idaho — An exotic plant that was raised with special permission in three local fields for the biological control of pale cyst nematode was discovered outside its intended planting area, in an adjacent barley field.

Officials say there was no real risk of the tropical plant, called litchi tomato, spreading and becoming a new weed in Idaho — as none of the unwanted plants had gone to seed, and the escape was attributed to hold-over seed in the mechanism of the grower's planter.

Nonetheless, the release represents the first official strike against the so-called trap crop, which stimulates PCN to "suicide" hatch in the absence of a viable host. The special-use permit with the Idaho State Department of Agriculture instructs Bonneville and Bingham counties to add the plant to their noxious weeds lists, restricting its planting within their borders,



John O'Connell/Capital Press
Bonneville County Weed Department Superintendent Jeffrey Pettingill holds a litchi tomato plant that escaped from an adjacent field, in which it was planted for biological control of pale cyst nematode. The yellow flags in the background mark locations of other escaped plants.

once three separate releases are confirmed, said Bonneville County Weed Superintendent Jeffrey Pettingill.

Pettingill and other county weed superintendents helped the Idaho Potato Commission and program stakeholders draft the litchi tomato permit.

Pettingill doubts litchi tomato could survive Idaho's climate without irrigation but added, "A lot of these weeds, we think they act one way and

then they adapt themselves."

After barley was harvested from the adjacent field, litchi tomato escapes were found growing in even rows, about the width of a grain drill. Pettingill is optimistic the program will make the necessary adjustments and avoid strike three.

Tina Gresham, PCN program coordinator with USDA-APHIS, said future protocol will entail disassembling and cleaning trap areas of grain drills after litchi tomato is planted.

In 2006, PCN — a microscopic worm that feeds on potato roots — was discovered in Eastern Idaho, still the only known U.S. infestation. USDA-APHIS has led the eradication effort and envisions litchi tomato as an affordable and environmentally safe option to methyl bromide, which has been suspended from program use due to grower claims of toxicity in subsequent forage crops.

UI greenhouse testing shows litchi tomato reduces viable cysts by 70 to 95 percent.

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