

# Environmentalists sue to reinstate grazing prohibitions

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI  
Capital Press

Environmentalists want to reinstate grazing prohibitions on 22,000 acres across 13 sites in Eastern Oregon to improve studies of sage grouse habitat.

The Oregon Natural Desert Association, Audubon Society of Portland and Defenders of Wildlife have filed a lawsuit seeking to overturn a federal plan that re-opened the “research natural areas” to cattle earlier this year.

Banning grazing from the 13 sites is necessary for the U.S. Bureau of Land Management to understand how cattle affect “sage brush plant communities,” since there are “almost no ungrazed areas on public lands” within the bird’s range in Eastern Oregon, the complaint said.

“If implemented as approved, BLM through this plan amendment will abandon science, severely limiting the agency’s ability to contribute to conservation of the sage grouse,” according to the environmental plaintiffs.

A representative of the BLM said the agency doesn’t comment on pending litigation as a matter of policy.

Jerome Rosa, executive director of the Oregon Cattlemen’s Association, said the organization is concerned by the lawsuit because it took a lot of work to persuade the Interior Department and BLM to restore grazing within the “research natural areas.”

“Grazing is compatible with sage grouse habitat,” while research can still occur in areas that are grazed, Rosa said.

“They’re really important to the ranchers who make their living on those areas,” he said.

Controversies over the bird’s status under the Endangered Species Act

are deep-rooted in the West, where its population has substantially declined in the past two centuries.

Environmentalists long pushed for the sage grouse to be protected as a threatened or endangered species, but the federal government ultimately decided such a listing wasn’t warranted in 2015 after finding that resource management plans and conservation agreements would sufficiently protect the bird.

Under the resource management plans for Oregon, the Obama administration eliminated grazing from nearly 22,000 acres within the 13 “research natural areas” that would serve as a control baseline in scientific studies.

In 2019, however, the Trump administration updated Oregon’s RMPs to once again permit cattle within those areas due to “economic impacts to certain livestock operators.”

The environmental plaintiffs claim this change violates the National Environmental Policy Act because the BLM “failed to give good reasons for its reversal of policy” and didn’t take the required “hard look” at the policy’s environmental impacts.

The policy shift also violates the Federal Land Policy and Management Act due to the range degradation and impairment from grazing, which is “a destructive and inconsistent use of these specially-protected areas,” the complaint said.

The Oregon Cattlemen’s Association believes the “massive” amount of acreage within the 13 sites is excessive, since research can occur on smaller plots, said Rosa, the group’s executive director. “They can have control areas within those allotments without it being such a large size and scale.”



U.S. Fish and Wildlife  
A greater sage grouse, rear, struts for a female at a lek, or mating ground. An environmental lawsuit aims to restore grazing prohibitions on 22,000 acres across 13 sites in Eastern Oregon.

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