

New Oregon mining boom could be a bust for sage grouse

BY BRADLEY W. PARKS

Oregon Public Broadcasting

McDERMITT, Ore. — Katie Fite crouched behind some waist-high sagebrush, and her dog Bell nestled in the plant's cozy cavity to shield from howling winds.

It was the first Saturday in April, peak mating season for sage grouse on a remote stretch of the Oregon-Nevada border. From where Fite and her dog sat, they could see more than a dozen male grouse displaying their tail feathers and issuing their signature zip-popping call to bring all the girls to the yard.

All around the lek — the flat, open areas where sage grouse congregate during mating season — were wooden stakes marking where mining companies may one day scrape away this crucial habitat to get at the minerals contained in the cake-soft earth of the McDermitt Caldera.

The old supervolcano straddling the state line is laced with some of the highest concentrations of lithium in the United States, making it a prime target for miners and prospectors looking to feed a growing hunger for batteries to store renewable energy and power electric vehicles.

It's also some of the country's best remaining sage grouse habitat, which has declined precipitously in the past century.

"There's still hope for sage grouse here, unlike many other areas," said Fite, who's monitored sage grouse for decades and now serves as public lands director for the conservation group Wildlands Defense. "But it'll be a death knell for sage grouse out here if industrial mega-mining for lithium takes place."

Just a few years ago, the McDermitt Caldera was off-limits to new mining claims to protect sage grouse. But rule changes under the Trump administration opened the door to extractive industry, and industry walked in.

Multiple companies have staked mining claims in southeast Oregon and are issuing



Nick Myatt/Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, File

Sage grouse males inflate their air sacs during the spring mating ritual.

bold statements about the region's lithium prospects to lure investors. Meanwhile, the Biden administration is making a big push to build a stand-alone battery supply chain in the U.S., further filling the mining industry's sails.

The U.S. is heavily reliant on foreign imports of raw materials used in batteries, including lithium. That leaves the supply chain, and thus the country's transition off fossil fuels, vulnerable to geopolitical conflicts like the U.S. trade war with China and Russia's war on Ukraine.

"Clearly, the U.S. needs guaranteed domestic supply," said Lindsay Dudfield, executive director of Jindalee Resources Limited, an Australian company exploring a large lithium deposit in Oregon's Malheur County. "And so you've seen bipartisan support for the development of critical minerals projects in the United States growing."

Companies touting southeast Oregon's mineral potential, including Jindalee, are several years away at the earliest from developing mines if they get to that point at all. Any mine would require state and federal approval that could face legal challenges. But conservationists like

Fite say the damage to sage grouse habitat has already started with exploratory drilling tearing up patches of sagebrush, and that any new mining would be devastating. "This would represent a total, tragic loss," Fite said. "And I believe it has to be stopped."

Open for business

Sage grouse need sagebrush to survive. They use the plant for food, brooding and shelter. The birds do best in areas with continuous, abundant sagebrush and minimal to no human disturbance.

Excessive livestock grazing, oil and gas production, residential development, wildfire and mining have chewed away about half of the sage grouse habitat the American West historically supported.

Population declines sent the birds hurtling toward the federal endangered species list before 2015 when U.S. government agencies adopted alternative plans to try to save them.

Among other protections, the sage grouse plans recommended a "mineral withdrawal" to block new mining claims on 10 million acres of the best remaining habitat in the country — including the McDermitt Caldera. Sarah Stellberg, a staff at-

torney for the environmental law firm Advocates for the West, said the decision to keep sage grouse off the endangered species list was predicated on preventing new mines on those acres, called sagebrush focal areas.

"The concern is that if you allow development to go forward that there aren't actually enough concrete mitigation actions to protect the bird in areas that are being mined," Stellberg said.

Interior Secretary Sally Jewell, under President Barack Obama, proposed the mineral withdrawal. That triggered a two-year period during which sagebrush focal areas were off-limits to new mining claims while the full proposal underwent environmental review.

But President Donald Trump's first Interior secretary, Ryan Zinke, made quick work of unraveling the sage grouse plans when he took office.

Under Zinke, the Bureau of Land Management allowed the temporary mineral withdrawal to expire and abandoned the environmental review of a permanent mineral withdrawal in 2017, saying "future mining is not a significant threat to sage grouse habitat."

That decision opened the McDermitt Caldera for busi-

ness. The industry has responded.

A wooden stake marks the Jindalee Resources mining claim amid a sea of sagebrush in the McDermitt Caldera on the Oregon-Nevada border Friday, April 1, 2022. The caldera is labeled by the federal government as the best of the best remaining sage grouse habitat.

Jindalee currently holds the only permit to explore for lithium in Oregon, but at least two other companies — Aurora Energy Metals and ACME Lithium — have nearby claims they say could hold promising lithium deposits.

Advocates for the West challenged the Trump administration's decision to abandon the mineral withdrawal in court and won. As a result, the BLM is again considering a proposal to block new mining claims in prime sage grouse habitat, but it's unclear how doing so now would affect existing claims in southeast Oregon.

Stellberg said every bit of habitat disrupted by mining or exploration, especially in well-preserved areas like the McDermitt Caldera, sends sage grouse closer to Endangered Species Act protection.

"If this is where we're going to be allowing mines to go forward, then we're left with lower-quality habitat that just can't sustain the number of birds that we need to allow the species to persist," Stellberg said.

Drilling's early toll

Fite slung a camera over her shoulder and set out on ranch roads to get an up-close look at the Jindalee mining claim, which covers thousands of acres on the Oregon side of the caldera north of McDermitt Creek.

The company drilled 11 holes in December to try to increase its confidence in the amount of lithium contained in its claim. So far, Jindalee estimates it has the second-largest known lithium deposit in the United States.

Despite extensive mapping and monitoring by state and federal agencies marking the

area as key habitat for sage grouse, Lindsay Dudfield says Jindalee is not aware of birds lekking on its claim.

"We understand that there are no sage grouse leks on our claims," Dudfield said in an email, adding that the company still does not drill in winter or spring to minimize impact on breeding.

Signs of sage grouse are everywhere in the claim area, from stray feathers poking out of the dirt to piles of the birds' Cheeto-like scat. Not to mention the nearby leks. Fite says neither Jindalee nor the government agencies regulating its activity have taken the time to look for sage grouse on the claim.

Over the course of multiple visits, Fite has documented new roadlets created by heavy machinery, piles of dead sagebrush and trash. She called the damage from exploratory drilling "classic habitat fragmentation" that, even if legal and permitted, is terrible for the sage grouse. Breaks in the continuous carpet of sagebrush can, for instance, invite fire-prone invasive plants like cheatgrass.

"They're gonna destroy the habitat in the exploration alone before they even get to the mining," Fite said.

Fite faults the BLM for allowing mineral exploration to go forward in such sensitive habitat when the agency's charge under the 2015 federal sage grouse plans is to protect the birds. BLM spokesperson Brian Hires confirmed in an email that Jindalee's claims are within a sagebrush focal area, the agency's label for the best of the best sage grouse habitat.

However, because the Trump administration scrapped the proposed mineral withdrawal in 2017, "these lands have been open" to new mining claims, Hires said.

BLM regulations say any company exploring for minerals just needs to notify the agency of planned drilling activity at least 15 days before work begins.

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Morning Worship 11 AM
Evening Worship 6 PM
Discovery Kids Worship 6:30 PM
3520 Birch St, Baker City
541-523-4332

Harvest Church

WORSHIP GATHERING
10:00 AM

Harvest Cafe Open
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3720 Birch St, Baker City
541-523-4233
www.BakerCityHarvest.org

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www.bakercitydsda.com
17th & Pochontas, Baker City
541-523-4913

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Baker City
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Service at 11 am
Live Streaming on Facebook

1734 Third Street, Baker City
541-523-3922
firstlutheranbakercity@gmail.com

Baker & Haines United Methodist Churches

Baker UMC, 1919 2nd St, at 11am
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Pastor Michele Holloway

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