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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

DECEMBER 12, 2018

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13.12.2018

## Collaboration Failure: Trump Trashes Sage Grouse Protections



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Last week the Trump administration announced it was slashing the area dedicated to protecting imperiled sage grouse populations from 10.7 million acres to 1.8 million acres and opening the rest to drilling and mining. For the faux conservation collaborators who were crowing about their great victory in keeping sage grouse from being protected by the Endangered Species Act, it's another huge loss for collaboration and a win for industry and developers.

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Sage grouse are native ground-dwelling birds about the size of chickens that only a century ago numbered 16 million across 13 Western states and three Canadian provinces. Latest estimates put their decimated population at somewhere between 200,000 and 400,000, primarily due to habitat destruction through sagebrush eradication, industrial impacts and development.

Sage grouse have been candidates for listing under the Endangered Species Act since 2002, but in 2015 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service was congressionally prohibited from listing the birds as threatened for 10 years. That should have been a wake-up call to those who profess to being advocates for sage grouse protection and restoration that politics, not science, would call the shots in the future. Unfortunately, instead of putting up a fight for giving the birds the full protection of the Endangered Species Act, various groups and agencies opted for collaboration to halt the precipitous population decline.

Governors across the West duly appointed their advisory committees, making sure to “balance” industrial interests with those hoping to keep the sage grouse from becoming extinct. “Balance” is the favorite word for politicians and industry to give the appearance of fairness, but is actually a dodge to avoid taking the hard steps needed to remedy serious environmental problems.

Montana was no exception and, after years of meetings and symposiums, speeches and congenial back-slapping, the advisory committee forwarded its recommendations to Gov. Steve Bullock — who immediately cut the recommended distance between industrial activities and sage grouse mating sites by almost half.

The sage grouse advocates should have put up a fight right there and then and put Bullock on the spot for ignoring science in favor of industry. But they didn’t, since the nature of collaboration is going along to get along and they didn’t want to wind up on the wrong side of a governor with future political aspirations.

The poster child for this misplaced collaboration was none other than Missoula’s Land Tawney, president/CEO of Backcountry Hunters and Anglers which, rather unbelievably, posted a [picture of him online with a dead sage grouse](#) on Sept. 28, 2015, with the caption: “How are you celebrating the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service decision not to list the sage grouse under the Endangered Species Act? Here at BHA, we went hunting. Here’s BHA President/CEO Land Tawney savoring the conservation success.”

Conservation success? Well, here we are a couple short years later and the reality of Tawney and the other collaborators’ “success” is fully revealed. Whereas the Fish and Wildlife Service claimed the new land-management plans would protect the sage grouse’s

habitat of 165 million acres across eleven Western states, it has now been reduced by the Trump administration and Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke to a mere 1.8 million acres. At some point even the most hardcore collaborators are going to have to face the facts. They have been played for fools by politicians and industry. For the sake of present and future generations, it's time for them to admit that and, if they're going to claim to be conservation advocates, they had best start racking up some real, not imaginary, "conservation successes."