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Contact:
Kristin Ruether, Senior Attorney, Western Watersheds Project (208) 440-1930
Travis Bruner, Executive Director, Western Watersheds Project (208) 788-2290

Lawsuit Challenges Livestock Grazing that Harms Sage-Grouse in Craters of the Moon National Monument

Boise, ID—Today, Western Watersheds Project filed a lawsuit challenging the Department of Interior’s approval of fifteen sheep grazing permits for the Big Desert Sheep allotment located partly within Idaho’s Craters of the Moon National Monument. In addition to renewing the grazing permits without fully considering relevant environmental impacts, the Bureau of Land Management’s decisions expand the grazing season by 40 days and allow 17 miles of new fencing in priority habitat for Greater sage-grouse. Fences pose known collision risks for the low-flying bird and changes to the season of use result in new impacts during its critical breeding and nesting periods.

"BLM keeps saying that they are taking the conservation of sage-grouse seriously," said Kristin Ruether, Western Watersheds Project's Senior Attorney. "If that were true, these decisions would have never been issued. To actually increase sheep impacts in important sage-grouse habitat is the exact opposite of what this species needs. The potential for harm is disclosed in the agency's own documents, and yet they are going ahead with the projects anyway."

There are nine active sage-grouse leks on the allotment and 21 additional occupied leks within 5 miles of the allotment. Monitoring data reveal serious declines in lek attendance, from around 50 males per lek in 1951 to just 10 males per lek in 2013. These declines necessitate immediate protections, something the BLM's decisions fail to provide. Instead, the decisions allow livestock on the allotment earlier in the spring and later into the summer, and authorize the creation of a 5,800 acre “forage reserve” that can be used by grazing permitees when conditions elsewhere are too poor to continue grazing. The forage reserve would require new fencing within close proximity to sage-grouse leks.

The decisions also permit new range developments, including a corral, a well, troughs, and other infrastructure, which would provide water sources and increased perches for ravens and raptors that prey on sage-grouse chicks and eggs.

"The BLM is building new infrastructure that is likely to increase ravens in the project area yet, at the same time, Idaho Fish and Game has proposed to kill nearly 1000 ravens in this region using poisons," said Travis Bruner, Executive Director of Western Watersheds Project. "The agencies should address the cause of declining sage-grouse populations, which is livestock grazing in sage-grouse habitat, and habitat fragmentation. Frankly, getting rid of the root of the problem would do a lot more good."

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Copies of the filings are available upon request.

Photos of the Big Desert allotment are available for media use and can be viewed online [here](#).

Western Watersheds Project works to protect and restore public lands and wildlife in the West through education, public policy initiatives and legal advocacy.