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Protest Filed Over Oil, Gas Leasing That Endangers Utah Sage Grouse

FILLMORE, *Utah*— Conservation groups today filed a formal [protest](#) against the Bureau of Land Management's plan to auction off more than 23 square miles of public land in central Utah for fracking and drilling, which will harm the imperiled Sheeprocks population of greater sage grouse.

According to the BLM, the Sheeprocks sage-grouse population declined by nearly 40 percent in just four years, and decreased in eight out of the past 10 years.

"It's time for the BLM to walk its talk and take Sheeprocks sage-grouse habitat off the auction block," said Kelly Fuller, energy campaign coordinator for Western Watersheds Project. "Science shows that oil and gas drilling results in fewer sage grouse."

The proposed oil and gas leasing on federal public lands includes priority sage-grouse habitat vital to the birds' survival. In April six [conservation groups warned the BLM](#) not to lease this critically important habitat, but the agency ignored conservationists and still plans to offer the habitat for lease.

"The BLM is blowing off conservation science and federal law to allow short-term profits for oil companies," said Michael Saul, a senior attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity. "Auctioning off this vital habitat for drilling and fracking may wipe out this population of Utah sage grouse and signal the beginning of the end for this imperiled bird."

The sale comes after the BLM [vowed in February](#) to increase protection for the grouse and their habitat in the Sheeprock Mountain area of Juab, Tooele and Utah counties. The BLM's February promise was not optional: Utah's federal sage-grouse plan, with its mandatory protections under federal law, requires the BLM to take new action to ensure sage-grouse survival after such a dramatic population drop.

In 2011 the BLM assembled a blue-ribbon panel of sage-grouse experts, called the National Technical Team, to make recommendations on land-management strategies that would allow sage grouse to survive. These experts recommended closing priority sage-grouse habitats entirely to oil and gas leasing. In the end federal sage-grouse plans committed to prioritizing oil and gas leasing and drilling outside important habitat for the birds.

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“The greater sage grouse has been the subject of an enormous conservation effort to prevent the species from coming so close to extinction that it requires protection under the Endangered Species Act,” said Steve Holmer, vice president of policy for American Bird Conservancy. “Backward steps such as this drilling project in priority habitat, and the Department of the Interior’s review of the grouse conservation plans raise grave doubts for the survival of this species.”

Government efforts to increase the Sheeprocks population have become increasingly desperate. They include capturing sage grouse in other areas and trucking them to Sheeprocks; killing red foxes and other wildlife that prey on sage grouse; and tearing out thousands of acres of pinyon pines and juniper trees. In 2016 alone [nearly \\$1 million](#) was directed toward Sheeprocks sage-grouse conservation.

Fracking and drilling of the nearly 15,000 acres included in the Utah BLM’s September 2017 lease sale will also harm mule deer and elk who rely on those public lands for the habitat they must have to survive the winter. Studies have shown that mule deer avoid oil and gas development, causing them to abandon important habitats. The Sublette mule deer herd near Pinedale, Wyo., declined 30 percent where oil and gas had been developed and only 10 percent where oil and gas development did not take place.

The mission of Western Watersheds Project is to protect and restore western watersheds and wildlife through education, public policy initiatives and legal advocacy.

The Center for Biological Diversity is a national, nonprofit conservation organization with more than 1.3 million members and online activists dedicated to the protection of endangered species and wild places.

American Bird Conservancy is a non-profit organization whose mission is to conserve native birds and their habitats throughout the Americas. It achieves this by safeguarding the rarest bird species, restoring habitats and reducing threats to bird species.