

Commissioners

From: MACO <MACO@mtcounties.org>
Sent: Thursday, February 27, 2014 8:16 AM
To: MACO
Subject: Advocates want coal mining banned near sage grouse

Importance: High

Advocates want coal mining banned near sage grouse

BILLINGS, Mont. (AP) — Wildlife advocates have filed a legal petition with the federal government that seeks a prohibition on coal mining in areas across the West with prime habitat for sage grouse.

The petition was filed Wednesday with the U.S. Office of Surface Mining by the group WildEarth Guardians. The agency has 90 days to respond.

Jeremy Nichols is the climate program director for WildEarth Guardians. He said a mining ban in sage grouse habitat makes sense given that other federal agencies are working to reverse the bird's long-term decline.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has said grazing, mining and other pressures are imperiling sage grouse across the West.

The agency is under a 2015 deadline to decide whether to add the chicken-sized birds to the list of threatened and endangered species.

Link to WildEarth Guardians website:

http://www.wildearthguardians.org/site/PageServer#.Uw9RtIWK_ks

Webpage from their website:

Wednesday, February 26, 2014

Coal Mining Threatens Imperiled Sage Grouse With Extinction in Western U.S.

Rulemaking Petition Filed with U.S. Coal Mining Agency to Keep Dirty Energy from Decimating Iconic Wildlife Habitat

Contact: Jeremy Nichols (303) 437-7663

Denver—WildEarth Guardians today called on the U.S. Office of Surface Mining to keep coal mining out of critical sage grouse habitat and help rescue the iconic bird of the American West from nearing the brink of extinction.

“Throughout the West, coal mining isn’t just stripping the land, it’s pushing the sage grouse closer to the extinction,” said Jeremy Nichols, WildEarth Guardians’ Climate and Energy Program Director. “All we’re asking is that the Office of Surface Mining step up and keep this unique symbol of the west from being undermined any further.”

The sage grouse once ranged throughout the western United States and into western Canada. Its range has declined by more than 55% because of extensive destruction and degradation of sagebrush habitat.

In 2010, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service declared the sage grouse warranted protection under the Endangered Species Act to prevent its continued slide to extinction. The agency is under a legal deadline to protect under the Endangered Species Act the bird by September 2015.

The loss of sagebrush habitat has been spurred by myriad factors, but coal mining has been explicitly identified as contributing to the decline and endangerment of the sage grouse. The Fish and Wildlife Service has also noted that inadequate regulatory mechanisms exist to protect the grouse from further loss of habitat.

In a rulemaking petition filed with the Office of Surface Mining Director, WildEarth Guardians called on the agency to adopt scientifically based conservation measures that have already been endorsed by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management.

These measures, recommended by a National Technical Team in 2011, called for the protection of sage grouse priority habitats and pressed that surface disturbance—including surface coal mining and surface impacts associated with underground mining—be prohibited in these key habitats.

Although the Bureau of Land Management and other land and resource management agencies have stepped up to implement the National Technical Team recommendations, the Office of Surface Mining has thus far made no similar commitments to conserve the sage grouse.

“It’s critical that the Office of Surface Mining join in efforts to conserve this irreplaceable bird,” said Nichols. “At the end of the day, this is a simple ask that the agency follow the science and further the protection of the sage grouse and the West.”

A review by WildEarth Guardians found considerable overlap between coal fields in the western U.S. and sage grouse priority habitat, particularly in the states of Colorado, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming. While mining activities have large remained out of priority habitats, in some cases expanded mine operations threaten priority habitats.

In southeastern Montana, plans to expand the Spring Creek mine, a massive coal strip mine in the northern Powder River Basin would destroy an extensive swath of priority habitat. And in northwestern Colorado, plans to expand the Colowyo mine, a large strip mine in Moffat County, would squarely impact priority habitat.

In Wyoming, mining operations at the Jim Bridger mine and the proposed Carbon Basin mines are already occurring within priority habitat. The Jim Bridger mine fuels the Jim Bridger coal-fired power plant while the Carbon Basin mines are intended to fuel a coal-to-liquids project near Medicine Bow.

The Office of Surface Mining has 90 days to respond to the rulemaking petition.

Link to court document:

[http://www.wildearthguardians.org/site/DocServer/2014-2-26 OSM Sage Grouse Petition.pdf?docID=12942](http://www.wildearthguardians.org/site/DocServer/2014-2-26_OSM_Sage_Grouse_Petition.pdf?docID=12942)

Harold Blattie, Executive Director
Montana Association of Counties
2715 Skyway Drive
Helena MT 59602
406.449.4360 (W)
406.698.0939 (C)
406.442.5238 (F)
hblattie@mtcounties.org
www.mtcounties.org