

Feds release new proposals for sage grouse

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Federal officials have released draft management proposals for protecting sage grouse habitat in Idaho and southwestern Montana.

The Idaho Statesman reports (<http://bit.ly/19qXGY8>) that one of the two preferred alternatives released Friday includes Idaho's plan developed from the Sage Grouse Task Force created by Idaho Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter.

The proposals cover about 9.3 million acres of Bureau of Land Management land and 1.9 million acres of U.S. Forest Service land. The public has 90 days to comment.

"At first blush it looks like we've got some things in there we can build on," Otter spokesman Jon Hanian said.

Proposals were also released Friday in other states. The plans cover three full Western states _ Utah, Nevada and Idaho _ and slivers of three others: Wyoming, California and Montana.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Agency is under court mandate to determine by 2015 if sage grouse deserve protection under the Endangered Species Act. BLM officials want to finalize plans by October 2014. Sage grouse, chicken-sized birds known for their elaborate mating dances in specific mating areas called leks, are found in 11 Western states.

Otter formed the task force hoping to avoid the seeing the sage grouse listed as a protected species, which could cause ramifications for ranchers and others by limiting the use of public lands.

"At least they're tipping their hat to the state effort," said Bill Myers, who served on the task force. Meyers is an attorney who represents ranchers.

While the preferred plans developed by federal agencies and the state task force have similarities, there are also key differences.

Otter's plan creates three zones across southern Idaho that together form a sage grouse management area. The zones would allow various levels of human activity. The BLM has three similar designations.

The "core habitat" under the state plan includes 4.9 million acres and 73 percent of the active leks. In that zone, big infrastructure projects would not be allowed. The BLM ups that by putting 7 million acres in the most restrictive category.

Another difference involves standards for rangeland as measured by the health of native grasses and shrubs, streamside areas and watersheds, and protections for sage grouse.

The state plan requires meeting the standards only if the sage grouse population drops or if conditions become so bad action is needed. That conflicts with the federal plan, federal officials said.

Jessica Gardetto, a BLM spokeswoman, said differences between the draft proposals will likely be worked out ahead of the final proposal.

"We found that we could not select just one of them," Gardetto said. "We must meld the two in order to create the best plan for sage grouse conservation."

Information from: Idaho Statesman, <http://www.idahostatesman.com>