

WILDLIFE: Groups decry plan to kill 4,000 ravens to protect sage grouse in Idaho (Monday, May 5, 2014)

Scott Streater, E&E reporter

A coalition of conservation groups says a federally approved plan that will allow the state of Idaho to poison or shoot an estimated 4,000 ravens won't achieve the stated goal of protecting greater sage grouse and in fact might do more environmental harm than good.

The plan to cull raven populations in Idaho was approved by the Fish and Wildlife Service and developed by the Agriculture Department's controversial Wildlife Services predator-control program, which is tasked with destroying animals deemed a threat to crops and livestock.

The ravens, which are protected by federal law, will be killed by shooting, baiting with poisoned chicken eggs and destroying nests ([Greenwire](#), March 20). Idaho Game and Fish and Wildlife Services would partner on the raven control plan.

There is still a legitimate question about the impacts of ravens on grouse populations, and the proposal in Idaho is "intended to help answer whether ravens are indeed a depredation threat," said Miel Corbett, an FWS spokeswoman in Portland, Ore.

But the coalition of conservation groups, including the American Bird Conservancy and National Audubon Society, recently sent two letters to Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack and FWS Director Dan Ashe asking them to abandon the Idaho plan.

Fish and Wildlife is currently evaluating whether to propose listing the bird as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act, and southern Idaho has some of the largest sage grouse populations in its 11-state range.

In the [letter](#) to Vilsack, the coalition of groups wrote that the proposal "ignores the central threats to Greater sage-grouse habitat and populations throughout Idaho," which it lists as wildfire, weeds, habitat fragmentation due to human development and livestock grazing.

The coalition also wrote that the proposal "fails to fully examine the direct, indirect and cumulative impacts of using the avicide DRC-1339 across the southern Idaho landscape."

Carol Bannerman, a Wildlife Services spokeswoman, said the pesticide is designed to be expelled by the ravens before they die, so if a raptor or other animal ate a dead raven it would not ingest the poison.

The groups also asserted that killing the ravens is "unnecessary," stating that an environmental assessment of the plan by Wildlife Services "admits that raven predation is not a 'significant range-wide threat' to Greater sage-grouse."

"For these reasons, we respectfully ask that Wildlife Services abandon this project, and refocus its efforts on improving sage-grouse habitat and populations through more scientifically supportable methods," they wrote.

Todd Tucci, senior attorney for Advocates for the West, one of the groups that signed the letter to Vilsack, said the coalition wants Vilsack "to abandon USDA's raven-killing experiment as unwise, unnecessary and unlawful."

"We are happy to work with USDA in a constructive manner to address the causes of the sage-grouse population crash, but scapegoating birds is not the solution," Tucci said in a statement.

In a second [letter](#) to Ashe, the coalition of groups asked him to "strongly consider revoking" the permit allowing "the use of lethal measures" as part of a two-year study evaluating the effectiveness of raven control on greater sage grouse populations in the state.

The coalition noted an FWS report last year that ranked predation by all predators as threat 17 out of 18 and a recent U.S. Geological Survey [report](#) that stated, "There is little published support for predation being a limiting factor in sage-grouse populations."

Instead, it wants Fish and Wildlife to focus on conservation efforts like those outlined last year in a number of proposed resource management plan amendments aimed at implementing management strategies to preserve and restore the grouse.

"Scapegoat actions like 'raven control,' which decades of research have demonstrated to be ineffective in large landscapes, waste agency resources and do not lead to lasting benefits for grouse," the coalition wrote in the letter to Ashe. "This type of misguided program should not be enabled by the USFWS' issuance of a scientific collection permit and should not be seen as a viable alternative to the types of large-scale land management policy changes that are necessary to support Sage-Grouse populations in perpetuity."

But Corbett, the FWS spokeswoman, said the agency needs to determine whether culling raven populations will work. "The purpose of this proposal is to conduct an analysis of whether removal of ravens is an effective management tool," she said.

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