



WALDEN, Colorado: In this photo, male greater sage grouse, foreground, perform a mating ritual for females on a lake outside Walden. — AP photos



RAWLINS, Wyoming: Male sage grouse fight for the attention of a female, southwest of Rawlins.

WITH NO PROTECTIONS FOR WESTERN BIRDS, FOCUS IS ON LAND-USE

BILLINGS, Montana: Before the applause faded from the US government's announcement that there would be no endangered species protections for the greater sage grouse, the criticism began over wide-reaching federal conservation plans meant to protect the bird's habitat across 11 Western states. The land-use plans were released Tuesday after Interior Secretary Sally Jewell said additional federal protections weren't needed for the ground-dwelling bird that's seen its habitat shrink due to oil and gas drilling, grazing and other human activity.

The US Bureau of Land Management plans outline measures to help sage grouse across 67 million acres of public lands throughout the West, including 12 million acres of prime habitat where strict limits on oil and gas limits will be enforced. Federal lands make up more than half the bird's habitat. Many of the same state officials who cheered Jewell's announcement have

previously said the new BLM conservation plans were overly restrictive, particularly with oil and gas drilling. Their next step is to try to bring those federal conservation plans in line with their own. "This doesn't end the discussion of where we're going to be," Montana Gov. Steve Bullock said after Jewell's announcement.

In Wyoming, where the biggest concentrations of sage grouse are found, the plans would limit disruptions like oil and gas drilling as far as six-tenths of a mile away from any sage-grouse breeding area. Mines and oil and gas drilling pads would need to be spaced no closer than every square mile. Also, drilling would be prohibited for three and a half months each spring during breeding season. Those restrictions apply only to designated "priority habitat" for the birds, not everywhere they are found. And they are far more permissive than the three-mile limit on breeding sites that scientists rec-

ommended. Oil and gas activity can bring breeding to a halt if it gets too close to the birds, said Steve Holmer, a senior policy adviser with the American Bird Conservancy. States and the BLM came up with their own proposals on how to protect sage grouse habitat on the lands they manage. The resulting plans are credited with staving off the Endangered Species Act protections that state officials feared would cause even greater harm to the economies across the 257,000-square-mile region where the chicken-sized bird ranges. "We think the plans need to be given a chance to work," Holmer said, adding that provisions in the documents allow for future changes if grouse numbers continue their long-term decline.

Federal management

The Independent Petroleum Association of America predicted the land-use plans will harm

small oil and gas producers in particular. "Today's decision will put more restrictions on our energy producers, making it more costly to operate and harder to provide the benefits of abundant, affordable energy to American families," said Dan Naatz, IPAA senior vice president of government relations and political affairs. Some environmental groups also were critical of the BLM land-use plans, but for the opposite reason. Erik Molvar with the WildEarth Guardians said the planning effort began with promise, but the exceptions, modifications and waivers they allow mean the protections could evaporate.

"What seems to be coming out the other end of the sausage grinder is a weak collection of compromises that will not and cannot conserve the species," Molvar said. For states like Montana, where 29 percent of sage grouse habitat is under federal management, the prob-

lem is that the BLM plans set different standards from their own conservation plans. That includes differences in buffer zone distances and caps on the total amount of land that can be disturbed in prime sage grouse habitat.

The federal plans also are far more restrictive in new leases for oil and gas sites in primary sage grouse habitat. Bullock spokesman Mike Wessler said state officials will pressure the BLM to make their management plans more consistent with Montana's. Those restrictions haven't generated the same response in Wyoming as they have in Montana. Wyoming Gov. Matt Mead said he was satisfied with how the state's conservation plan will work with the federal plans. Wyoming officials worked with their federal counterparts for much of the last decade to find a mutually agreeable approach to sage grouse. "We think we got it in a good place now," Mead said. —AP

STARBUCKS, NIKE JOIN 100% RENEWABLE ENERGY PLEDGE

NEW YORK: Major US companies including Walmart, Starbucks and Nike vowed yesterday to move completely to renewable energy in the long term as part of a global effort against climate change. The non-profit Climate Group announced the latest additions to its campaign during a week of events in New York that aim to build momentum for a global agreement to fight climate change. Consumer goods giants Johnson & Johnson and Procter & Gamble, and investment banking titan Goldman Sachs also joined the year-old effort.

"Our mission is to help people live longer, healthier and happier lives. We understand the intrinsic link between a healthy environment and human health," said Alex Gorsky, CEO of Johnson & Johnson, whose products range from bandages to pain relief capsules. Renewable energy sources such as the sun and wind result in no emissions of carbon dioxide, the key factor behind the planet's rising temperatures that scientists fear will cause worsening scarcities and disasters. The Climate Group's initiative, dubbed RE100, does not set a deadline for companies to meet the goal or spell out consequences if they do not. European firms in particular have

faced legal requirements to curb emissions under the Kyoto Protocol, which the United States shunned. Several companies that joined the RE100 initiative have faced criticism for aspects of their businesses. Walmart is known for its hostility to labor unions but has been active on climate change, saying that environmental efforts are critical to maintaining low costs. Walmart has already set a goal of shifting entirely to renewables, which it says now supply about 24 percent of the retailer's electricity.

The Climate Group said that 36 major businesses now belong to the initiative. Companies that previously joined include food giants Mars and Nestle, Ikea, H&M, electronics maker Philips and Indian software company Infosys. The announcement comes on the heels of a study that found that institutions worth \$2.6 trillion have renounced fossil fuels, sharply up from a year earlier. But national plans submitted ahead of a year-end conference in Paris, which is aimed at drafting a new global climate agreement, show that the planet remains well off from a goal of limiting temperature rises to 2.0 degrees Celsius (3.6 Fahrenheit) above pre-industrial levels. — AFP

BARRING 'SUICIDE HOTSPOTS' CUTS NUMBER WHO TAKE THEIR OWN LIFE

SUICIDE A LEADING CAUSE OF DEATH IN 15- TO 29-YEAR-OLDS

LONDON: Installing barriers, safety nets and other restrictions at notorious suicide hotspots like bridges, cliffs and railways could cut the number of suicides at these sites by more than 90 percent, according to research published yesterday. In a large study covering known hotspots around the world, researchers found that other measures such as putting up signs and crisis telephones to encourage people to seek help also appear to significantly reduce the number of deaths.

Suicide is currently the second leading cause of death among 15- to 29 year-olds, according to World Health Organization (WHO) data. Across all age groups worldwide, around 800,000 people kill themselves each year. Some of the world's most notorious suicide sites include London's "Tube" subway system, the Eiffel Tower in Paris, the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco and the Prince Edward Viaduct in Toronto. Jane Pirakis at the University of Melbourne in Australia, who led this research and published in The Lancet Psychiatry journal, said it showed how certain intervention measures can "buy time to allow an individual to reconsider their actions and allow others the opportunity to intervene".

Pirakis' team conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis of all studies examining the effectiveness of three suicide prevention measures - restricting access to the means, encouraging help-seeking and increasing the likelihood of intervention by a third party. They then used modeling to estimate the effect of each intervention in isolation or in combination with others. The results, using data from 18 studies in all, showed that the interventions significantly reduced the number of suicides at the sites in question - with deaths falling

from an average of 5.8 suicides a year before actions were taken, to an average of 2.4 deaths annually afterwards.

Measures aimed at blocking access to places where people go to kill themselves led to 91 percent fewer suicides a year when used in combination with other interventions, and a 93 percent reduction when used alone.

Experts say suicide hotspots are accessible, usually public sites frequently used as a location and which gain a "reputation for suicide". These can include bridges, tall buildings, cliffs, railway tracks and isolated places rural car parks and woodland. "Suicide attempts at these sites are often fatal and attract high profile media attention which can lead to copycat acts," Pirakis said. — Reuters

OREGON SEEKING SOLUTIONS TO DROVES OF FEARLESS DEER

PORTLAND: A town in southern Oregon will hold a public meeting to discuss how to deal with droves of fearless deer that wander the streets, occasionally acting aggressively toward residents, state wildlife officials said on Tuesday. The "Deer Summit 2015" will be chaired by Ashland Mayor John Stromberg as part of efforts to address deer that have stalked people, pawed at them with their hooves and even stomped on small dogs.

"The deer have no fear of humans," said Mark Vargas, District Wildlife Biologist for the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife. The confident deer are a product of a long tradition in the town of 21,000 people of feeding and befriending them, Vargas said. For the last two or three decades, the black tailed deer have been known to roam into yards and stroll the downtown area of Ashland,

which lies in the heavily forested foothills of the Siskiyou and Cascade Mountains. "Deer just live there," Vargas said. "They live amongst all the people and when that happens there's going to be conflict."

Stromberg said on the city's website that he wants to hear from community members with ideas about what to do. The mayor could not be reached for comment on Tuesday, but city officials have urged residents not to feed the deer, and to put up deer fencing or deer resistant plants. In a statement, the officials said a recent attack on a homeowner by a deer protecting its fawn was a reminder that locals share their community with all manner of wildlife. "No matter how cute and seemingly domesticated, these are wild creatures. Their behaviors are unpredictable," they said on the city's website. — Reuters

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Dr. Fahad Al-Mukhaizeem
فهد علي المخيزيم

استشاري أطفال
M.B. Bch. FRCPC. FAAP. PEM



Al-Jabriya - Block 1A - St. 1 - Mazaya Building - 15th Floor - Clinic B - Tel.: 22269369 - Fax: 22269368