

Draft Sage Grouse Management Plan workable, but could impact rates if restrictions added

Last month the state accepted public comments and held several public hearings on the Draft State Greater Sage Grouse Management Plan. The provisions and restrictions contained in that plan will have a direct impact on several electric cooperatives throughout the state, and as member-owners of your respective cooperative, could directly impact your rates.

The draft plan was requested by Gov. Steve Bullock in hopes of avoiding a federal listing of the Greater Sage Grouse as a threatened or endangered species. The plan was drafted by a council created by Bullock and comprised of four legislators — two Democrats and two Republicans — and a cross-section of various interests representing the energy industry, bird hunters, conservationists, tribes, agriculture producers and local government.

The Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association appreciates the governor taking the initiative on this issue, and supports the concept of a state management plan for the sage grouse as an alternative to the possibly indiscriminate, aggressive consequences of a federal listing. However, some restrictions that remained in the plan as of press time in



A male sage grouse tries to attract a female during the breeding season a few years ago. Protecting grouse breeding grounds, called leks, is the primary goal of the Draft State Greater Sage Grouse Management Plan.

Photo by Mona Doebler of Hinsdale

mid-November are a concern to MECA and electric cooperatives throughout the state.

MECA supported adopting the Wyoming state management plan, which previously was approved by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. That plan has proven to be effective and workable for all sides — since it was implemented in 2008, Wyoming's sage grouse population has stabilized or is growing in some areas while still allowing reasonable economic activities, including power lines, in sage grouse habitat.

The Montana draft plan, as of press time, is more restrictive than the Wyoming plan, and there is apparent pressure being placed on Montana by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to make our state's draft plan even more restrictive.

One particularly troubling provision in Montana's draft plan would require power

lines or other development to be located at least one mile from leks, or breeding areas, located within core sage grouse management areas. With these core areas located across eastern and central Montana, as well as southwestern Montana, routing power lines around these large buffers could easily render power line construction cost-prohibitive. Other provisions of the Montana plan that affect power lines are similarly troublesome. However, they may be workable so long as they are not made more restrictive in the final version as a result of the apparent federal pressure on the state.

So why does all of this matter to you, the members of the state's electric cooperatives?

Montana's rural electric cooperatives have many miles of power lines in sage grouse country, so co-ops

will be more directly impacted by sage grouse management decisions than any other electric utilities in the state.

Collectively, 24 electric distribution cooperatives in Montana own more than 54,000 miles of power line across the state — a system more than three times larger than the state's largest investor-owned electric utility. Additionally, since Montana's electric cooperatives serve mostly rural areas with sparse populations and

cover vast land areas, they generally have markedly higher costs of delivering power compared to more-urban utilities. And remember, as not-for-profit utilities owned by their members, all costs of power delivery must be passed on directly to the members. This means severe restrictions on power line location, operation and maintenance will directly impact the rates of the more than 400,000 Montanans who receive their power from electric cooperatives.

A state sage grouse management plan is a good concept, but MECA and the state's electric cooperatives hope that when the plan is finalized it will not only protect this important Montana native bird, but also the low power rates enjoyed by nearly half of the state's population during an economic time when no one wants to see costs increase.