

The Honorable John McCain
Chairman, Armed Services Committee
United States Senate
Washington DC 20510

The Honorable Jack Reed
Ranking Member, Armed Services Committee
United States Senate
Washington DC 20510

June 15, 2015

Dear Chairman McCain and Ranking Member Reed:

On behalf of the undersigned sportsmen, conservation, and resource professional organizations, we respectfully encourage you to oppose inclusion of the Lee (#1687) amendment to the Fiscal Year 2016 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). This amendment would undermine existing state and federal conservation plans that have been developed explicitly to keep the sage grouse off of the endangered species list. Lee #1687 would also transfer ultimate decision making authority on federal lands across a large swath of the West to the states, an unprecedented shift in authority.

Success for sage-grouse is keeping the bird off of the endangered species list and retaining its continued management by the states through strong, conservation plans on federal public lands, coupled with state conservation plans and voluntary efforts from private landowners. We believe that we are firmly on the path to realizing that success. However, delays in the decision-making process, like those included in the Lee amendment would curtail current efforts to assure that voluntary measures and regulatory assurances will be in place in a timely fashion.

Eleven Western states and the federal government have been engaging in an historic level of cooperation and collaboration; our organizations believe that if this robust process is allowed to continue, with the full engagement of all interested parties, that these efforts may preclude the need for listing. Importantly, the USFWS has not requested a delay so as to get to a “not warranted” finding.

Any delay creates even more uncertainty for industry, ranchers and other stakeholders by keeping the status of the greater sage-grouse in limbo, as “warranted, but precluded,” for 10 years. Delaying the decision also increases the likelihood of the species being listed further down the road as the urgency is removed for a number of years.

We are also concerned about the reshaping of federal decision making and management of our public lands. The Lee amendment would not only result in an enormous waste of taxpayer dollars already invested on federal management plans, but also would:

- hand over authority of federal public lands management to the states by forcing the federal agencies to use state-developed plans, some of which would not stand alone to conserve sagebrush ecosystems;
- give Governors of 11 western states veto power over management decisions on federal lands that belong to all Americans;

- erode the implementation of bedrock conservation statutes designed to ensure checks and balances regarding the use and management of our public lands and jeopardize the federal government's ability to do almost anything related to sagebrush ecosystems, including fighting and managing wildfire, energy development, habitat restoration, and managing invasive species.

It is also important to note that more is at stake than the sage-grouse. The sage ecosystem is home to more than 350 different species, including such iconic species as mule deer, pronghorn and elk. If we can successfully conserve the sage-grouse and its habitat, we will help prevent a cascade of future listings that could seriously impact the western economy. The proof that collaboration works was clearly illustrated earlier this year, as the distinct Bi-State population of sage-grouse was deemed unwarranted for listing by the Department of Interior; a similar process can play out with a similar successful outcome on the range-wide population of greater sage-grouse if Congress allows that process to continue.

Moreover, the Lee amendment is irrelevant to our nation's defense and complicates the important effort to pass the National Defense Authorization Act. Therefore, the undersigned organizations encourage you to reject the Lee amendment.

With regards,

Backcountry Hunters and Anglers

Berkley Conservation Institute – Pure Fishing

National Wildlife Refuge Association

National Wild Turkey Federation

North American Grouse Partnership

Pheasants Forever

Public Lands Foundation

Quail Forever

Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership

The Wildlife Society

Wildlife Management Institute