Written by **Michael Tennant** on August 22, 2011

Obama Administration Gives Taxpayers 112 Million Reasons to Grouse About Wasteful Spending

"Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack announced last week that the USDA would dedicate $21.8 million to pay eligible ranchers and farmers in the state of Wyoming to encourage conservation practices that preserve the numbers of Sage Grouse," CNSNews.com writes. "That will bring to $112 million the total amount that the USDA has distributed over the last two years to eligible farmers and ranchers in 11 states as part of its Sage Grouse Initiative."

The money is being disbursed through five different federal programs in the form of "subsidies to farmers … to cover a portion — up to 75 percent, in some cases — of the cost of implementing certain conservation practices, technologies and techniques," according to the news service.

In a recent conference-call briefing, Vilsack stated that the government was spending the money now "to avoid having the Sage Grouse be placed on the endangered species list," which could place harsh restrictions on farmers' and ranchers' use of their land. This approach is expected to find much favor with farmers and ranchers, who will be happy to accept free money from Washington, especially if it keeps the bird off the list and keeps their property in their own hands. Chuck Cushman, executive director of the American Land Rights Association, told CNSNews.com "that land owners would welcome the USDA money, but not if it comes with strings attached or doesn't shield property owners from having to implement draconian conservation practices and technologies without government assistance in the future, if the sage-grouse is ever placed on the Endangered Species List." Likewise, says the website, the American Farm Bureau Federation endorsed the policy "as long as the effort remains voluntary."

One can hardly disagree with these organizations that cooperation is preferable to coercion and that the restrictions triggered by an endangered species listing are so severe that it would be better to do what it takes to keep the Sage Grouse off the list than to risk Washington's wrath later on. Still, those farmers and ranchers accepting subsidies to protect their own property are, in the process, violating others' property rights since the subsidies first have to be taken from others via taxation. Thus, the very existence of the unconstitutional Endangered Species Act virtually guarantees that the government will infringe upon someone's right to dispose of his own property as he sees fit, whether to prevent a species from making the list or to protect it once is has been listed.

This entire affair would be bad enough if the Sage Grouse were really in danger of extinction; after all, no one really wants to see the bird disappear from the face of the Earth. But the fact of the matter is that the Sage Grouse population is still high enough that, according to a 2010 Interior Department

press release, it will probably take "30 to 100 years" before "many local populations … disappear," after which "remaining fragmented populations [would be] more vulnerable to extinction in the long-term." In addition, said the department, "the *sage-grouse* population as a whole remains large enough and is distributed across such a large portion of the western United States that Fish and Wildlife Service biologists determined the needs of other species facing more immediate and severe threat of extinction must take priority for listing actions." The department did state that the Sage Grouse "warrants the protection of the Endangered Species Act" but said that "listing the species at this time is precluded by the need to address higher priority species first."

Washington isn't the only place where the Sage Grouse remains officially unendangered. CNSNews.com notes that "most states do not treat the bird as if it were endangered," and "state-regulated hunting of sage grouse is permitted in all but one state."

Why the push, then, to get the Sage Grouse listed and, in the meantime, to spend millions of taxpayer dollars in hopes of preventing that? In 2007, the Interior Department, then under President George W. Bush, refused to list the Sage Grouse, a decision that was overturned by a federal court in Idaho, whereupon a gaggle of environmental groups petitioned the department to list the bird. The Obama Interior Department then ruled as described in the above-quoted press release, steering "a middle course between conservationists who wanted ironclad protections for the ground-hugging bird and industry interests and landowners who sought the ability to locate mines, wells, windmills, and power lines in areas where the grouse roam," in the words of the *New York Times*.

The ruling, nevertheless, gave environmentalists the legal high ground, as evidenced by the fact that Congressmen from western states — notably, Utah Republicans Rob Bishop and Jason Chaffetz — registered their disapproval of it. Chaffetz was particularly disdainful, quipping, "The only good place for a sage grouse to be listed is on the menu of a French bistro."

It also provided the Obama administration with an excuse to shower taxpayer dollars on western states, many of which are heavily Republican, under the guise of protecting farmers' and ranchers' property — a move undoubtedly calculated to boost Obama's chances of reelection next year.

At a time when the government is $14.6 trillion in debt and everyone in Washington claims to be looking for ways to save money, spending $112 million to protect a quite populous species and to shore up political interests will only give taxpayers one more reason to grouse about those birds in the capital.

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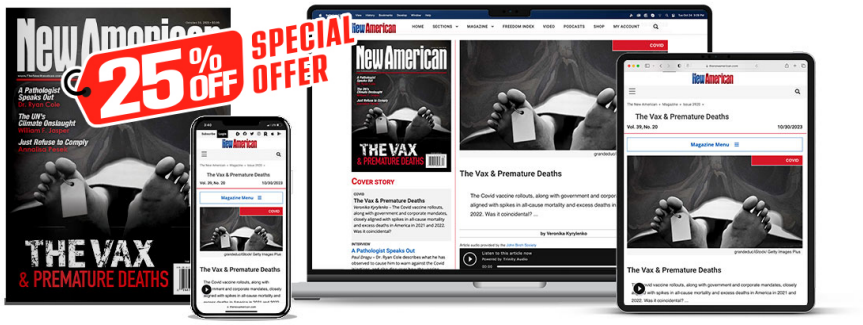

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