

SL Tribune: Western Wildlife Habitat Council

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Governors agree on preservation effort:
Create new agency to protect wildlife habitat

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JACKSON, Wyo. - Governors across the West agreed Sunday on a regional effort to help protect wildlife habitat and migration corridors that are being overrun by rapid growth and resource development.

The Western Governors Association voted to create the Western Wildlife Habitat Council, which will be assigned to identify crucial wildlife corridors and habitats in the West and to help shape policy to preserve those important landscapes.

"This is a process by which we are also able to . . . say, 'What are those lands that really are important longer term to our state?' instead of just letting the federal government forget about action because it gets lost in the shuffle," said Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr., the incoming chairman of the Western Governors Association.

"It's just not happening at the federal level. We're just not getting any resonance with the BLM in terms of the lands that are getting increasingly fragile and vulnerable, that we as a state need to step up," and take the lead, he said.

Preserving the wildlife habitat is important, a report adopted Sunday by the governors argues, because it is an economic engine and defines the Western way of life. But the systems are at risk from growth, new roads and rail lines, and energy projects and power lines that have diced up the ecosystem and cut off seasonal migration routes.

Utah, the report said, has spring and fall migration corridors for elk, mule deer, bighorn sheep and habitat for black bear, sage grouse and pronghorn sheep.

Climate change has changed the suitability of some habitat for Western species, and is expected to continue in the coming decade.

The focus has to be regional, the governors agreed, because the at-risk wildlife frequently roam across borders.

"These aren't just state-by-state, it's got to be cross-borders, which means standardizing the way we recognize the issue, the way we quantify the issue, the importance we place on habitat preservation and energy security," Huntsman said.

John Harja, coordinator of Huntsman's Utah public lands policy office, will represent Utah on the council.

"This is powerful," Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne said of the regional initiative. "We need to have what the Western Governors are suggesting in a solidified effort, because there's power in this."

Reliable data can help policymakers and the public shape the decision, said Jack Dangermond, CEO of Environmental Systems Research Institute, which specializes in mapping software. He showed maps illustrating how human development has conflicted with wildlife habitat and how those clashes will likely worsen as the West continues to grow.

"Wildlife habitats are disappearing," he said. "We need to be able to acknowledge this is a problem, recognize it is a problem and be more thoughtful in the way we guide development in the future."

Reliable doesn't necessarily solve the problem, however. Steve Elbert, vice chairman of the energy firm BP America, said companies like his have reduced the environmental impacts of energy development, but there is still disagreement over whether it is enough.

Photo: Jack Dangermond, ESRI presenting at WGA

