

Meeting Date: July 24, 2024

Agenda Item No. 5E1

Agenda Item: 2024 Sage-grouse Season Setting
(Action)

Bureau Chief Approval: SR

Prepared by: Jennifer Struthers, Staff Biologist

Background:

Greater sage-grouse were a candidate for listing under the Endangered Species Act from 2010–2015, when the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service determined listing sage-grouse as a threatened or endangered species was not warranted. Despite significant investments in habitat restoration and management, the overall sage-grouse population trend continues to decline in Idaho and range-wide. The primary threats to sage-grouse are related to habitat loss, alteration, and degradation (e.g., wildfire and invasive annual grasses, infrastructure development, drought, etc.).

From 1996–2020, the Department followed the hunting season and bag-limit guidelines from the 2006 *Conservation Plan for the Greater Sage-grouse in Idaho*. During those years, season frameworks were evaluated by comparing 1996–2000 lek count averages to the most recent three-year running averages within 14 reporting zones and sage-grouse hunters were required to purchase an unlimited, statewide sage- and sharp-tailed grouse permit. The 2006 guidelines suggested seasons could be closed if <100 males were observed in a population or if wildfires or West Nile virus were affecting a population or zone. While this approach did not result in overharvest of sage-grouse at the statewide level, it did not allow for adaptive management at a local scale. The Department initiated rulemaking in 2020 to manage sage-grouse harvest within reporting zones, with limited hunting tags. This approach provides more flexibility and responsiveness to annually adjust harvest opportunities by zone consistent with sage-grouse population trends at a more local scale.

The Department implemented the sage-grouse tag and zone system for the 2021 season. The sage-grouse tag system is designed to limit harvest to no more than 10% of the estimated fall population in each of 12 reporting zones. The ability to manage harvest opportunity by zone and estimated annual fall population size reduces the potential for harvest to negatively impact populations. The tag and zone structure also allows the Department to provide closely regulated harvest opportunity in areas where a general season could not previously be offered because hunter participation could not be regulated.

In July 2023, the Commission approved 2,958 sage-grouse tags among 12 reporting zones for fall 2023 hunting seasons (an increase of 448 tags compared to fall 2022). An estimated 1,380 hunters harvested approximately 1,336 sage-grouse, which was 4.7% of the 2023 fall population index for the 12 reporting zones.

Statewide, sage-grouse lek counts increased 22% from 2023 to 2024, the highest count since implementation of the tag and zone system. Increases were observed in all zones, with substantial increases in the North Owyhee (39%), Jarbidge (20%), Camas Prairie (25%), Bear Lake Plateau (97%), Sand Creek (20%), Medicine Lodge (47%), Lost River (48%), and Salmon/Challis (51%) sage-grouse reporting zones and moderate increases in the South Owyhee (18%), Shoshone Basin (4%), Craters (8%) and Big Desert (14%) sage-grouse reporting zones.

The Department used spring 2024 sage-grouse lek counts and other sage-grouse demographic data to generate a fall population index for each reporting zone and then calculated proposed tag numbers for the 2024 season based on that index.

The Commission sets sage-grouse hunting seasons and bag and possession limits annually. The purpose of this agenda item is to set the fall 2024 sage-grouse hunting season and bag and possession limits.

Statutory Authority and/or Policy Issues:

In 2015, Governor Otter signed *Executive Order No. 2015-04 Adopting Idaho's Sage-grouse Management Plan*, which directed all executive agencies to adopt the Governor's Plan. On March 18, 2022, Governor Little signed *Executive Order No. 2022-03 Adopting Idaho's 2021 Sage-grouse Management Plan and Idaho Sage-steppe Mitigation Process*.

The 2021 Idaho Plan incorporates updated information from the 2015 Idaho Plan. The 2015 and 2021 plans recommended adaptive regulatory triggers to evaluate population and habitat changes and respond to land management decisions. The 2015 Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service sage-grouse land-use plan amendments also formalized these population and habitat triggers. Since formalization of Governor Otter's plan and the federal plans in 2015, the Department has increased lek survey efforts to assure accurate and sufficient data collection to evaluate population triggers.

Idaho Statute 36-104 authorizes the Commission to establish by proclamation seasons and bag limits for the taking of wildlife consistent with state policy.

Public Involvement Process:

The 2024 sage-grouse season proposals will be available for public comment on the Department website from June 27–July 14, 2024. Staff will provide a summary of public input to the Commission at the meeting. No regional open houses are planned.

Justification:

Commission action is required to establish seasons and bag and possession limits for harvest of sage-grouse, including bag and possession limits for take by falconry, for the 2024 season.

Staff Recommendation:

Final recommendations for the 2024 sage-grouse hunting seasons and bag limits, including bag and possession limits for take by falconry, will be presented at the Commission meeting.

Suggested Motion: I move the Commission adopt staff recommendations for the 2024 sage-grouse hunting seasons and bag and possession limits, including bag and possession limits for take by falconry.