

Meeting Date: July 27, 2023

Agenda Item No. 5B

Agenda Item: 2023 Sage-grouse Season Setting (**Action**) **Bureau Chief Approval:** SR

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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 only required to purchase an unlimited, statewide sage-grouse 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 was affecting a population or zone. While this approach did not result in overharvest of sage-grouse at the statewide level, it didn't allow for flexibility in localized management. The Department initiated rulemaking in 2020 to manage sage-grouse harvest within zones with limited hunting tags to provide more flexibility and responsiveness to annually adjust harvest opportunity in accordance 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 2022, the Commission approved 2,510 sage-grouse tags across 12 reporting zones for the fall 2022 hunting seasons (an increase of 560 tags compared to fall 2021). An estimated 1,235 hunters harvested 1,147 sage-grouse, which was about 4% of the fall 2022 minimum estimated statewide population. Statewide, sage-grouse lek counts increased 8% from 2022 to 2023 but were still down 30% from 2016. Zone-specific trends were variable in 2023, with modest increases in the North Owyhee (14%), Jarbidge (16%), and Lost River (8%) sage-grouse reporting zones and greater than 20% increases in the South Owyhee (23%), Shoshone Basin (22%), and Craters (29%) sage-grouse reporting zones. Conversely, the Bear Lake Plateau (-45%), Salmon/Challis (-32%), and Camas Prairie (-13%) reporting zones decreased from 2022. Sand Creek (-1%), Medicine Lodge (-3%), and Big Desert (-4%) were essentially stable between 2022 and 2023. Above average snowfall and late spring conditions may have affected both over-winter survival and sage-grouse distribution during the lekking season in 2023. The Department used spring 2023 sage-grouse lek counts and other sage-grouse demographic data to estimate minimum fall populations for each reporting zone and then calculated proposed tag numbers for the 2023 season based on that estimate.

The Commission sets sage-grouse hunting seasons and bag and possession limits annually. The purpose of this agenda item is to set the fall 2023 sage-grouse hunting season. The public involvement process will conclude just prior to the July Commission meeting (see Public Involvement Process below) and specifics on that public involvement process and resulting 2023 sage-grouse season proposals will be presented at the meeting.

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 greater 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 2023 sage-grouse season proposals will be available for public comment on the Department website from July 5-19, 2023. 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 2023 season.

Staff Recommendations:

Final recommendations for the 2023 sage-grouse season will be presented at the Commission meeting.

Action Requested:

Set 2023 sage-grouse hunting seasons and bag limits, including bag and possession limits for take by falconry.

Suggested Motion:

Commission adopt staff recommendations for the 2023 sage-grouse hunting seasons and bag limits, including bag and possession limits for take by falconry.