



IDAHO FISH AND GAME GOLDSHEET

July 2025 Commission Meeting

Agenda Item: 2025-2026 Sage Grouse Season Setting

Presented by: Jennifer Struthers

Position/Title: Sage-grouse and Sharp-tailed Grouse Staff Biologist

Agenda Item No.: 5D

Supervisor Approval: SR

Background:

Greater sage-grouse were a candidate for listing under the Endangered Species Act from 2010 until 2015, when the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service determined listing sage-grouse 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, invasive annual grasses, infrastructure development, drought, etc.).

The Department implemented a sage-grouse tag and zone system starting with the 2021 season. The sage-grouse tag system is designed to limit harvest to <10% of the estimated fall population in each of 12 reporting zones. The ability to manage harvest opportunity by zone and fall population index 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 geographically regulated.

In July 2024, the Commission approved 5,091 sage-grouse tags among 12 reporting zones for the 2025–2026 hunting season (an increase of 2,133 tags compared to 2023). An estimated 2,353 hunters harvested approximately 2,508 sage-grouse, which was an estimated 6% of the 2024 fall population index for the 12 reporting zones.

Statewide, total counts of male sage-grouse on leks for 2025 were comparable to 2024. The Department used the 2025 lek counts and sage-grouse demographic data (e.g., sex and age ratios) to generate a fall population index for each reporting zone and then calculated proposed tag numbers for 2025–2026 seasons based on that index.

The Commission sets sage-grouse hunting seasons and bag and possession limits annually. Staff will present zone-specific tag recommendations for the 2025–2026 sage-grouse hunting seasons 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*. In 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



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habitat changes and inform land management decisions on federal land. The Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service 2015 plan amendments for sage-grouse incorporated these population and habitat triggers. The Department increased lek survey efforts starting in 2015 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 2025–2026 sage-grouse season proposals will be available for public comment on the Department website from June 23–July 6, 2025. The public may also comment on this item at the July Commission public hearing.

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 2025–2026 sage-grouse hunting season.

Staff Recommendations:

Final recommendations for 2025–2026 sage-grouse hunting season dates and bag and possession limits, including bag and possession limits for take by falconry, will be presented at the Commission meeting.

Suggested Motion:

I move the Commission adopt the 2025–2026 sage-grouse hunting season and bag and possession limits as presented by staff.