

Meeting Date: July 28, 2022

Agenda Item No. 5B

Agenda Item: 2022 Sage-grouse Seasons (**ACTION**)

Bureau Chief Approval: JR

Prepared by: Michelle Kemner, Wildlife 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, sage-grouse populations have continued to decline range-wide, including in Idaho. Sage-grouse populations face increasing threats of habitat loss due to wildfire and invasive annual grasses, infrastructure development, and drought.

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*. Season frameworks were evaluated by comparing the 1996-2000 lek count averages to the most recent three-year running averages within 14 reporting zones. Seasons could be closed in reporting zones if <100 males were observed in a population, or if wildfires or West Nile virus were affecting any population or zone. While this approach did not result in overharvest of sage-grouse at the statewide level, the Department initiated rule-making in 2020 to require sage-grouse game tags to provide more flexibility and responsiveness to adjust harvest opportunities annually by zone in accordance with sage-grouse population trends.

The Department implemented the sage-grouse tag and zone system for the first time last year. The sage-grouse tag system is designed to limit harvest to no more than a maximum of 10% of the estimated fall population in each of 12 reporting zones. The ability to manage harvest opportunity by sage-grouse reporting zone and estimated annual fall population size assures harvest will not negatively impact populations. The tag and zone structure also allows the Department to provide closely regulated harvest opportunity in areas where we could not offer a season under the former general season framework because we could not regulate hunter participation.

In July 2021 the Commission approved 1,950 sage-grouse tags among 12 reporting zones for fall 2021 hunting seasons. Survey estimates indicate 1,121 hunters participated in the hunt and harvested 605 sage-grouse, which was about 3% of the 2021 minimum fall population estimate.

Statewide, sage-grouse lek counts increased 26% in 2022 compared to 2021, but are still down 28% from 2016. Trends in 2022 were variable, with modest increases in Owyhee, Challis, North Magic Valley, and East Idaho Uplands sage-grouse reporting zones, and greater than 25% increases in South Magic Valley, Big Desert, and Upper Snake sage-grouse reporting zones.

Wildlife Bureau staff used spring 2022 sage-grouse lek counts and other sage-grouse demographic data to estimate fall populations for each reporting zone and calculated proposed tag numbers for the 2022 season.

The Commission sets Sage-grouse harvest seasons and bag and possession limits annually. The purpose of this agenda item is to set the seasons and bag and possession limits for the taking of sage-grouse for the fall 2022 season.

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 2022 sage-grouse season proposals will be available for public review and comment on the Department's website July 1-14, 2022. Staff will provide a summary of public input to the Commission at the meeting.

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 2022 season.

Staff Recommendations:

Staff will present final recommendations for the 2022 Sage-grouse seasons at the Commission meeting.

Action Requested:

Set 2022 sage-grouse hunting seasons and bag limits, including bag and possession limits for take by falconry.

Suggested Motion: That the Commission adopt staff recommendations for the 2022 sage-grouse hunting seasons and bag limits, including bag and possession limits for take by falconry.