

**Meeting Date: July 14, 2021**

**Agenda Item No. 5D**

**Agenda Item: 2021 Sage-grouse Seasons (Action)**

**Bureau Chief Approval: TB**

**Prepared by: Ann Moser**

**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 that listing sage-grouse as a threatened or endangered species was not warranted at that time. Despite significant investments in habitat restoration and management, sage-grouse populations continue to decline in Idaho and range-wide. Sage-grouse populations face increasing threats of habitat loss due to wildfire and invasive annual grasses, infrastructure development, and drought.

**Policy Issues:**

On May 27, 2015, Idaho Governor C.L. “Butch” Otter signed *EXECUTIVE ORDER NO. 2015-04 ADOPTING IDAHO’S SAGE-GROUSE MANAGEMENT PLAN*, which directs all executive agencies, to the extent consistent with existing state law, for relevant permits and policies, adopt the Governor’s Plan and all supporting documentation. Governor Otter’s Plan recommended adaptive regulatory triggers to evaluate population and habitat changes and respond to land management decisions. These population and habitat triggers were also formalized within the 2015 BLM and FS greater sage-grouse plan amendments. Since the formalization of Governor Otter’s plan and the federal plans in 2015, the Department has increased our lek survey efforts to assure that we have accurate and sufficient data to evaluate population triggers.

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. Reporting Zones could be closed 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this approach did not result in overharvest of sage-grouse at the statewide level in recent years, the framework is outdated and inflexible. New population tools and better data now allow us to estimate sage-grouse populations and to directly manage harvest based on current population numbers and status.

A tag system would also allow benefits for hunters including potential for increased season lengths and decreased hunter crowding.

In 2020, the Department initiated the process for a rule change to allow sage-grouse game tags. House Bill 235 was approved by the Idaho Legislature and signed by Governor Little in 2021.

**Public Involvement Process:**

On June 2, 2021, the Department posted a news release informing the public about the new sage-grouse tag. The Department will continue public outreach on the tag process immediately following the Commission setting the season.

**Justification:**

The sage grouse tag system is designed to limited harvest to  $\leq 10\%$  of the estimated fall population in each of the 12 reporting zones. Wildlife Bureau staff used 2021 lek data and other demographic data to estimate fall populations for each Reporting Zone and calculated tag numbers.

Statewide, sage-grouse populations increased 13% in 2021 compared to 2020, but are still down 48% from 2016. Trends in 2021 were highly variable, with continued declines in southwest Idaho, North Magic Valley, and the Greater Curlew Valley, compared to modest increases elsewhere.

**Staff Recommendations:**

Staff recommendations, including number of tags available in each Reporting Zone, will be finalized for the July 14 Commission meeting.

Preliminary recommendations include:

- Sage-grouse season 3<sup>rd</sup> Saturday in September through October 31
- Tags allocated annually within each Reporting Zone
- Hunters can purchase tags over the counter when tags go on sale (date TBD)
  - Hunters can purchase one or two tags per season depending on the Reporting Zone
  - Daily/season bag limit would be equal to the number of valid tags and individual held
- Statewide, the number of tags available would be approximately 1,900

**Action Requested:**

Approve the 2021 sage-grouse hunting season and tag limits as recommended.

Suggested Motion: Commission adopt staff recommendations for the 2021 sage-grouse hunting season.