

Meeting Date: March 20, 2020

Agenda Item No. 11

Agenda Item: Sage-grouse Harvest Management
Proposal

Bureau Chief Approval: TB

Prepared by: Ann Moser, Wildlife Staff Biologist

Background:

The Department has been following the hunting season and bag-limit guidelines from the 2006 *Conservation Plan for the Greater Sage-grouse in Idaho*. The Department evaluates population trend by comparing the 1996-2000 lek count averages to the current three-year running averages. If a population's current 3-year average is 150% above the 1996-2000 average, a standard 23-day season is allowed. If the population is between 50% and 150%, then a restrictive 7-day season is recommended. If a population is less than 50% of the baseline, then the season should be closed. An area should also be closed to hunting if there are <100 males in the population, if there is not adequate data to make a decision, or if habitat or other issues are impacting the population.

While this framework evaluates data and estimates harvest within 14 Reporting Zone, there currently is no system that allows harvest to be managed by Reporting Zone. Furthermore, the Department has improved its ability to closely monitor and track sage-grouse population numbers and trends, and model fall population numbers, rendering the 2006 guidelines outdated.

The Department is considering a change to how we manage sage-grouse hunting opportunity and harvest. Staff recommend investigating options that would allow the Department to maintain sage-grouse hunting opportunity into the future where appropriate, while also demonstrating more responsive management to our partners and critics. Specifically, staff propose initiating rule-making to provide the Commission authority to implement a limited tag system where sage-grouse populations and harvest would be monitored and managed by Reporting Zone or other broad management unit. The Commission implements a similar limited tag system to regulate hunting and harvest of sandhill cranes.

The potential advantages of a limited tag system for sage-grouse include:

- Ability to directly manage harvest by adjusting number of tags annually as population numbers or habitat conditions indicate.
- Preventing large closures due to wildfires or tripped population triggers by instead reducing number of tags.
- Allowing a small number of tags to open a hunt in southeast Idaho, which has been closed for many years due to inadequate long-term population data.
- Potential to increase season length, which would provide flexibility and options for hunters and reduce crowding on opening weekend.
- Increasing number of wings from hunter-harvested birds by directly providing mail-in wing envelopes to only those hunters with a tag.
- Improving harvest estimates.

Our preliminary analysis of tag numbers by reporting zone compared to previous harvest estimates indicates that the number of tags available statewide might not change, but the distribution of tags could change. Because our goal would be to limit harvest to <10% of the population in any zone, some zones could have fewer available tags than the traditional number of hunters. Conversely, new opportunities would be available in other parts of the state.

Staff will present additional details on the proposal and examples at the meeting. Staff anticipates an advantage to also including sharp-tailed grouse in the proposed rule-making to also provide the Commission the discretion and authority to implement a limited tag system for sharptails in the future.

Statutory Authority and/or Policy issues:

Idaho Code 36-104(2) grants authority to the Commission to determine when an open season may be declared for the taking of wildlife. IDAPA 13.01.09.100.01 established a validation for hunting sage-grouse and sharp-tailed grouse. Pursuant to Idaho Code Section 36-105(3), the Commission has the authority to set seasons, bag limits, and possession limits for these species. IDAPA 13.01.09.300 establishes rules regarding the take of upland game birds. Rulemaking is required to develop an alternative method to manage sage-grouse hunting through a limited tag system.

Public Involvement Process:

This agenda item is provided for Commission information. If the Commission chooses to initiate rulemaking, the proposal would be posted in the state Administrative Bulletin and public comments would be solicited for a 21 day period. The public would have additional opportunities to provide input during subsequent stages of the rulemaking process.

Justification:

Negotiated Rulemaking is required to provide the Commission authority to implement a limited tag system for sage-grouse.

Staff Recommendation:

Staff seeks Commission concurrence to initiate the negotiated rule-making process to develop rules and provide the Commission authority to implement a limited tag system for sage-grouse. Following the public input process, staff would present a recommendation to the Commission at a later date. No formal action is required at this time.