

Background:

Greater sage-grouse were a candidate for listing under the Endangered Species Act from 2010 until October 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.

Policy Issues:

The Department has been following the hunting season and bag-limit guidelines from the 2006 *Conservation Plan for the Greater Sage-grouse in Idaho*. Season frameworks are evaluated by comparing the 1996-2000 lek count averages to the most recent (2018-2020) three-year running averages. Lek route data in each of 14 Reporting Zones is evaluated and compared to the guidelines.

Option	3-year running average of lek counts	Days	Daily Bag
Closed	Less than 100 males observed Lek counts are less than 50% of 1996-2000 average counts Adequate lek data are not gathered for the population	0	0
Restrictive	Lek counts are between 50% and 150% of the 1996-2000 average	7	1
Standard	Lek counts exceed 150% of the 1996-2000 average	23	2

The Commission sets sage-grouse hunting seasons in August, which allows managers time to evaluate lek data and determine whether wildfires or West Nile virus are affecting any sage-grouse populations in Idaho. Idaho’s season-setting process allows for annual evaluations at the local level that considers circumstances that can change annually.

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 and 2019 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. The Department is taking into consideration population triggers in our season-setting process.

Public Involvement Process:

A statewide press release was issued on proposed seasons. A notice asking for public input was posted on the Department’s website. Regions accepted public input and directed the public and sage-grouse local working groups to provide input through the website.

Justification:

Trends of males on lek routes are the key parameter for selecting sage-grouse seasons. Statewide lek counts were up 2.5% from 2019 but down 53% from the high counts in 2016; however 2020 trends were variable among the Reporting Zones. Sage-grouse Reporting Zones 2, 3A, 3B, 4A, 4B, 6, 7B, 7C, 8A, and 8B (see attached map) meet the restrictive season criteria. The population triggers analysis indicates caution in most areas north of the Snake River and in part of Owyhee County. Our preliminary recommendations are:

- The Department recommends the Restrictive 7-day season, 1 bird daily limit, for Zones 2, 3A, and 3B.

- The Department recommends maintaining the closure in Zone 1 in Owyhee County, due to documented impacts from the 2015 Soda Fire. Eight-five males were observed on lek routes this year which meets the closed season criteria.
- We propose a 2-day season, 1 bird daily limit, for Zones 4A, 4B, 6, 7B, 7C, 7D, 8A, and 8B. Zone 7D met the closed season criteria. This small area has few leks and research has documented connectivity with the surrounding zones. The Department is therefore managing it at the larger scale. Furthermore, we recommend re-opening all of Zone 6 which has been closed since the 2018 Grassy Ridge Fire.
- Zone 5A qualifies for a closed season as <100 males were observed on leks in 6 of the last 7 years. The Commission closed Zone 5A in 2014 and the Department recommends continuing that closure.
- Zone 5 meets the closed season criteria due to lack of sufficient long-term data and low population numbers in most of the area.
- The West Central area (Washington and Adams counties) has a small sage-grouse population that has been closed to hunting since 1984.

Staff Recommendations:

Department recommendations will be finalized for the August 20 meeting, based on public input and current wildfires in sage-grouse habitat. Please see the attached map of the preliminary proposal for 2020.

Action Requested:

Approve the 2020 sage-grouse hunting seasons as recommended.

Suggested Motion: Commission adopt staff recommendations for the 2020 sage-grouse hunting season.

Sage-grouse Reporting Zones 2020

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PRELIMINARY SEASON PROPOSAL

- 2-day Season
- 7-day Season
- CLOSED

