

Meeting Date: August 23, 2018

Agenda Item No. 3B

Agenda Item: 2018 Sage-grouse Seasons (**Action**)

Bureau Chief Approval:

Prepared by: Ann Moser

Background:

Greater sage-grouse were a candidate for listing under the Endangered Species Act from 2010 until October 2, 2015, when the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service determined that listing sage-grouse as a threatened or endangered species was not warranted at this time.

Statutory Authority and/or 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 Alternative and all supporting documentation. This plan requires continued careful monitoring of sage-grouse populations.

For actions not addressed in Idaho’s Sage-grouse Management Plan, such as hunting, the plan states that the 2006 Conservation Plan for the Greater Sage-grouse in Idaho will continue to be in effect. Therefore, in 2018 the Department will continue to use the sage-grouse hunting season and bag-limit guidelines established in the 2006 state plan. Season frameworks are evaluated by comparing the 1996-2000 lek count averages (the beginning of intensified surveys and improving populations) to the most recent (2016-2018) three-year running averages. Lek route data in each of 14 Reporting Zones is evaluated and compared to the guidelines. 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.

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

Public Involvement Process:

Sage-grouse local working groups provided recommendations to their Region. 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 or directed the public to provide input through the website.

Justification:

Many stakeholders were involved in creating the 2006 Idaho Sage-grouse Plan. Trends of males on lek routes are the key parameter for selecting sage-grouse seasons. Statewide lek counts were down 18% from 2017 and 32% from 2016. Sage-grouse Reporting Zones 1, 3A, 3B, 4A, 4B, 6, 7B, 7C, 7D, 8A, and 8B (see attached map) meet the restrictive season criteria. Zone 2 met the standard season category; the current three year average was 28.0 males per lek and the 150% value was 26.5. However, since the

population was down 38% from 2016, the Region does not recommend the standard season for 2018.

Zone 5A (Greater Curlew Valley) qualifies for a closed season as <100 males were observed on leks in 4 of the last 5 years. The Commission closed Zone 5A in 2014 and the Region requests to continue 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.

The Department recommends a new closure for the area impacted by the 2015 Soda Fire (see yellow hatched area in Zone 1). Counts of males on leks have declined from 160 birds in 2015 to 69 in 2018. In addition, recent information from radio-collared birds indicates this population is experiencing high mortality and may be isolated from the remainder of Owyhee County.

Staff Recommendation:

Because the potential impacts of current wildfires are being evaluated, Department recommendations will be finalized for the August 23 meeting. Please see the map below of the preliminary proposal for 2018.

Action Requested:

Approve the 2018 sage-grouse hunting seasons as recommended.

Suggested Motion: Commission adopt staff recommendations for the 2018 sage-grouse hunting season.

