



MONTANA FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

THE **OUTSIDE** IS IN US ALL.

Meeting Date: Feb. 16, 2024

Agenda Item: Approval of Request to Translocate Sage-Grouse to Alberta, Canada, in 2024-2026

Action Needed: Final

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 10 minutes

Background: Sage-grouse in Alberta, Canada, declined from highs of 1,000–1,500 in the early 1980s to less than 40 in 2011. In 2008, a collaborative project was initiated between the department and Alberta Environment and Protected Areas (AEPA) to augment the endangered population of sage-grouse in southeastern Alberta. Between 2011 and 2019, 118 sage-grouse were captured in Montana and translocated to Alberta. These birds were monitored remotely using satellite transmitters, and AEPA believes the Montana birds substantially helped prevent extirpation of sage-grouse in Alberta while recovery efforts and reclamation work have increased. The Alberta population is now estimated at 54 sage-grouse, three years after the last translocation.

AEPA and partners are improving habitat in Alberta to increase suitability for sage-grouse. These activities include reclamation of oil and gas infrastructure, removal of anthropogenic structures to reduce predator habitat, habitat enhancements, and habitat protections.

Because the release sites are within 25 miles of Montana, these translocation efforts may bolster the trans-boundary sage-grouse population Montana shares. Northern Montana's sage-grouse source population has been stable over the past 25 years, with the 2023 lek trend count from the intended source population in Valley County at 10 percent below the long-term average. Removing up to 40 hens for translocation is unlikely to be measurable at the population level.

Previously, the Fish and Wildlife Commission approved the translocation of up to 40 sage-grouse in 2011, an additional 40 sage-grouse in both 2015 and 2019, and a translocation of 40 in spring 2023 (which did not occur due to inaccessibility of capture and release locations due to deep snow). AEPA is now requesting that the commission reauthorize the translocation of up to 40 sage-grouse during spring 2024–2026, originally evaluated under the 2015 environmental assessment (EA), decision notice, and the supplemental evaluation completed in 2022. The commission approved the translocation in August 2022 for spring 2023 implementation, but snow accumulations prevented the capture and translocation from occurring. An updated checklist EA will be completed prior to commission action.

Public Involvement Process and Results: A 2015 EA, updated in 2022, determined that negligible negative effects would occur from this action. Nine comment letters – two supporting and seven opposed – were received on the 2015 EA. Most spoke to the effect of removing birds from Montana, while other issues raised included genetic diversity, relevant plans, disturbance to leks, predators, disease, habitat, department resources, connectivity, and the need for an environmental impact statement. All of these are addressed in the final EA and response to comments. During the prior commission process in August 2022, three public comments were received – two supporting and one opposed. A supplemental EA checklist was completed in January 2024.

Alternatives and Analysis: Environmental evaluations have determined that the transfer of 40 sage-grouse from Montana to Alberta will have a negligible effect on Montana sage-grouse populations.

Alternative A: The commission may approve the removal of sage-grouse as for translocation as presented.

Alternative B: The commission may amend the number and timing of sage-grouse that may be removed or deny the request for removal.

Agency Recommendation and Rationale: The department recommends the commission approve the removal of sage-grouse for translocation to Alberta as presented by the department. The benefits to Montana include supplementing an international trans-boundary population and international expansion of sage-grouse range, which may be influential in future federal species status reviews and listing considerations.

Proposed Motion: I move that the Fish and Wildlife Commission approve the translocation of up to 40 sage-grouse to Alberta during spring 2024–2026 as presented.

Alternative Motion: I move that the Fish and Wildlife Commission amend the proposed translocation of up to 40 sage-grouse to Alberta during spring 2024–2026 as follows (Insert changes here).