

FISH & WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: January 14, 2016

Agenda Item: Alberta Sage Grouse Translocation

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Final

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 15 Min

Background

Sage grouse in Alberta, Canada have declined from highs of 1,000 - 1,500 in the early 1980s to less than 50 in 2011. After years of decline, the Alberta population stabilized during 2013-14 at a low of about 40 birds. To assist recovery, FWP translocated 41 birds from Phillips and Valley counties to southeast Alberta in 2011-12. The birds bred and integrated into the Alberta population within the first year. Alberta Environment and Parks believes the Montana birds provided a substantial contribution to the Alberta population and staved off extirpation. In 2015, three years after the translocations, Alberta recorded an increase to about 100 birds, a 150 percent jump in the population, and the first significant increase in 20 years

To continue recovery, Alberta requests up to 40 adult female sage-grouse from north-central Montana in the spring of 2016 with an additional 40 grouse requested bi-annually (2018 and 2020) for a total of up to 120 birds over the next five years. The environmental assessment for Montana has been out for public comment, and a Decision Notice signed giving the go ahead for the project.

Because the transplant sites are within 25 miles of Montana, Alberta's efforts may also benefit Montana because it will bolster this trans-boundary sage grouse population. Following two years of low numbers the northern Montana population from which the transplanted birds would be taken experienced an uptick of about 60 percent in 2015. The minimum population in south Valley and Phillips counties is estimated to be about 10,000 total birds including over 6,600 hens. Removing up to 40 hens for translocation will not noticeably effect the population. This is fewer birds than are taken by hunters and several studies, past and ongoing, have shown that the effects of hunting on Montana sage grouse are barely measurable and inconsequential. Instead of committing to future translocations at this time, FWP will evaluate populations before allowing translocations in 2018 and 2020 and may not allow them dependent upon the status of the source population in Montana and the success of previously translocated birds.

Public Involvement Process & Results

FWP supports the proposal. The EA was out for public comment for 30 days. Nine comment letters – two supporting and seven opposed – were received. 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, FWP resources, connectivity, and the need for an EIS. All of these are adequately addressed in the final EA and response to comments.

Alternatives and Analysis

None analyzed.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale

FWP recommends the Commission endorse translocating sage grouse to Alberta according to the terms and conditions outlined in the EA.

Proposed Motion

I move that the Commission endorse FWP's proposal to translocate sage grouse to Alberta according to the terms and conditions outlined in the EA.