

FISH and WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: November 12, 2015

Agenda Item: Alberta Sage Grouse Translocation

Division: Wildlife

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 30 Minutes

Action Needed: Endorsement

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Background: Alberta sage grouse have been struggling for a number of years, declining from highs of 1,000 - 1,500 birds in the early 1980s to less than 50 by 2011. Montana FWP has helped Alberta's efforts to increase sage grouse numbers by supplying birds for translocation. After the proper proposals and approvals were taken care of, 41 birds from Phillips and Valley counties were released in southeast Alberta in 2011 and 2012 as part of an initial pilot project. Despite problems with equipment failure and high predation rates, the pilot project showed that translocated Montana birds exhibited lek fidelity, successfully bred, and integrated with the resident sage-grouse population within the first year post-release. After years of continuous decline, the Alberta population experienced a short stabilization during 2013 and 2014 at a low of about 40 birds and exhibited a marked increase in 2015 to a current level of about 100. The Alberta Government believes that the earlier translocations contributed to the growth of the Alberta population and, along with other important recovery actions such as habitat work and predator control, have positioned Alberta for increased success from future translocations. There is every expectation that the knowledge gained from the pilot project, coupled with other important management practices, will result in improved translocation success in the future.

To continue recovery efforts the Government of Alberta is requesting up to 40 adult female sage-grouse from north-central Montana in the spring of 2016 with an additional 40 grouse being requested bi-annually (2018 and 2020) for a total of 120 birds over the next 5 years. Logistical help from Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks staff in the capture of the sage-grouse is also requested. If the Commission gives initial endorsement to the project today, the Environmental Assessment (EA) will be released for public comment through December 11th, with the Commission taking final action on the EA at its January 2016 meeting. Pending approval of the EA, actual capture and translocation of birds would begin in March and April 2016. The full proposal and letter of request from Alberta are included in the Commission packet.

The translocation project would not harm, and may help, Montana's population. Following 2 years of low numbers the northern Montana population from which the transplanted birds would be taken experienced an uptick of about 60% in 2015 and is estimated to be about 6,000 birds, including nearly 4,000 hens, in south Valley and Phillips counties. Although still 27% below the long-term average, removing up to 40 hens (up to about 1% of the hens) for translocation will not have a noticeable effect on the population. To the extent possible, only young birds not associated with a lek will be taken. Instead of committing to future translocations at this time, Montana will evaluate its population before allowing any translocations in 2018 and 2020 and may not allow them dependent upon the status of the population. Moreover, because the transplant sites are within 25 miles of Montana, Alberta's efforts may also benefit Montana because it will bolster a trans-boundary population.

Public Involvement Process & Results: MFWP R6 staff is supportive of the proposal. If endorsed today the EA will go out for public comment until Friday, December 11th with final Commission action in January.

Alternatives and Analysis: No alternatives were analyzed.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale: FWP recommends the Commission endorse FWP releasing for public comment the EA on translocating sage grouse to Alberta.

Proposed Motion: I move that the Commission endorse FWP to release for public comment the EA on translocating sage grouse to Alberta.