

FISH & WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: February 13, 2019

Agenda Item: Sharp-tailed grouse translocation site update

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Endorsement

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 10 minutes

Background: Sharp-tailed grouse (STGR) west of the Continental Divide in Montana are a species of concern with a state ranking of S1, “at high risk because of extremely limited and/or rapidly declining population numbers, range and/or habitat, making it highly vulnerable to global extinction or extirpation in the state.” However, east of the Continental Divide, STGR are doing very well with a state rank of S4, “apparently secure, though it may be quite rare in parts of its range, and/or suspected to be declining.” STGR west of divide became extinct in the early 2000s. STGR west of the divide have remained an FWP priority for 34 years dating back to the Libby Mitigation Plan that quantified habitat and wildlife losses after Koocanusa Reservoir was created. In 2018, FWP and several other partners completed an updated evaluation of potential STGR habitat in western Montana. The objective of the project was to compare habitat variables important to STGR in occupied areas east of the Continental Divide to those in unoccupied areas west of the Divide to determine if suitable habitat exists for a potential reintroduction effort in western Montana. Results show there is high-quality habitat that could serve as core areas for the reintroduction of STGR. In 2016, the commission endorsed FWP to move forward with an EA evaluating two areas: the Blackfoot Valley and the northern Bitterroot Valley. FWP would like to add a third area south of Drummond to be considered as an alternative and evaluated in the EA. After additional analysis, the habitat evaluation identified this area as one worth considering.

Public Involvement Process & Results

To date, FWP has worked with our partners, landowners, and ranch managers to complete the habitat assessment referred to above. The EA process encourages public participation and incorporates public comments generated during review. With commission approval, a third reintroduction site will be added to the EA and become part of the future public process.

Alternatives and Analysis

The STGR Restoration Plan, completed after endorsement by the commission, identified three potential sites where FWP would reintroduce STGR into western Montana. The new site included in the plan was the Drummond area. This project is supported by both the western Montana STGR plan and the statewide Upland Game Bird Plan. Without commission endorsement, FWP would not evaluate the Drummond area as a potential reintroduction site.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale

FWP recommends the commission endorse a third area south of Drummond to be considered as an alternative in the EA for sharp-tailed grouse in western Montana.

Proposed Motion

I move that the commission endorse a third area south of Drummond to be considered as an alternative in the EA for sharp-tailed grouse in western Montana.