



Region One
490 North Meridian Road
Kalispell, MT 59901

Region Two
3201 Spurgin Road
Missoula, MT 59804

**WESTERN MONTANA SHARP-TAILED GROUSE REINTRODUCTION
DECISION NOTICE
APRIL 3, 2019**

Description of Proposed Action

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposes to re-establish self-sustainable sharp-tailed grouse (STGR) populations west of the Continental Divide by reintroductions of STGR in core areas identified to have the most suitable habitat: the Blackfoot Valley, the northern Bitterroot Valley, and the Drummond Area. FWP would capture a total of 75-180 STGR each year for 5 years across Regions 4, 5, 6, and 7. Capture locations would be dispersed in a way as to minimize impact to source populations.

Public Involvement

The Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction draft environmental assessment was released for a 30-day public comment period on February 15, 2019. FWP posted a public notice on its webpage (<http://fwp.mt.gov>) and a news release was prepared and distributed to a standard list of media outlets in all regions potentially affected by the project. The draft EA was also available at all FWP Regional Headquarters and the State Headquarters in Helena. Additionally, public were notified public notices in the Flathead Beacon, Daily Inter Lake, Bozeman Chronicle, Great Falls Tribune, Missoulian, Billings Gazette, The Glasgow Courier, Havre Daily News, Miles City Star, and the Helena Independent Record.

Summary of Public Comments

FWP received 52 comments for the draft EA. One comment was received after the deadline and is not included in this decision notice. The remainder of public comments were generally positive and supportive in nature with few comments either neutral or non-supportive. Commenters raised the following issues/topics which require a response from FWP: predator control, existing STGR in the Bitterroot Valley and history of STGR in the Bitterroot Valley; the reason the STGR were extirpated; habitat assessment; opportunity to comment on the reintroduction plan; cost and funding; future hunting and outreach; source population concerns; added recreational value; future consideration for

additional relocation sites; Natural Resource Damage Program (NRD) options; taking private property rights; not a native species; sage-grouse versus STGR and protected species; MT.gov website; and no public notice sent to adjoining landowners.

FWP Responses to Public Comments

- 1. Predator control:** FWP received 5 comments regarding predators. One comment asked if FWP was going to control all of the predators in the area. Four comments expressed concern that reintroducing this will result in FWP controlling predator populations to improve project success. Of the four comments, two expressed very specific concerns that FWP would have the right to kill any predator that had an impact on the STGR reintroduction; "FWP will have the right void huge swaths of native animals; fox, ravens, skunks, weasels, badgers, coyotes, bobcats, hawks, endangered eagles, turkey buzzards (endangered)..." and "Part of FWPS disgusting plan allows them to wipe out and kill any predators of The Sharp Tailed Grouse bird eggs. This includes: Endangered protected eagles, red tailed hawks, falcons, turkey buzzards, great horned owls, red fox, badgers, wheasles, bob cats, racoons, skunks, coyotes, wolves..."

FWP Response: As part of the processes leading to the EA, FWP worked with Montana State University on a reintroduction plan. Within the plan, a population viability analysis (PVA) evaluated 11 management scenarios including a predator removal scenario. Mammalian predator impacts on nest survival were not included in the PVA because previous research found no effect of mesopredator trapping on nest success (Wiens 2007). While peer-reviewed literature suggests that for greater sage-grouse the removal of ravens can increase nest survival by 73% (Coates and Delehanty 2004), this increase did not hold true for STGR (M.C. Milligan et al 2018). Populations size and persistence under the predator removal scenario was only slightly higher than baseline scenarios and did not produce a viable population (M.C. Milligan et al 2018). Given the limited value of predator management on population viability, FWP will not pursue predator control or removal at this time.

Citations

Coates, P. S. and D. J. Delehanty. 2004. The effects of raven removal on sage grouse nest success. Proceedings of the Vertebrate Pest Conference 21:17-20.

Milligan, M. C., S. L. Wells, and L. B. McNew. 2018. A population viability analysis for sharp-tailed grouse to inform reintroductions. Journal of Fish and Wildlife Management. Vol. 9, 2:1-17.

Wiens, D. 2007. Nest success and site selection of shorebirds in North Dakota. Louisiana State University, Agricultural and Mechanical College, and Simon Fraser University.

- 2. STGR in the Bitterroot Valley:** FWP received one comment regarding the recent presence of STGR in the Bitterroot Valley on the Eastside Highway between Florence and Stevensville. The comment stated that the sighting was reported to the local FWP office, but no one believed the observer. Another comment spoke to the history of "prairie chickens" existing in the Bitterroot Valley which has been shared by generations of ranchers on the east side of the Bitterroots.

FWP Response: FWP will follow-up with the individuals that provided these comments prior to any reintroduction efforts and attempt to verify the observational information provided.

- 3. Why did populations of STGR in western Montana disappear:** FWP received two comments concerned with the disappearance of STGR in western Montana. The first comment suggested that it was more conventional to figure out why birds winked out in the first place before attempting to reintroduce the species, while the second comment questioned what has changed to limit survival and if there are other potential limiting factors. The second comment also suggested that even small populations of STGR should have persisted throughout the area.

FWP Response: From a conservation and management perspective it would be ideal to know why birds disappeared from the landscape prior to implementing a restoration project. While FWP could speculate about what led to population declines of STGR in western Montana, we do not have any research which ties any specific factors to the decline. Since there are no STGR existing on the landscape in western Montana, FWP cannot determine what the limiting factors may be for existence of this species. The only way to figure out what the limiting factors are, is to restore the populations and study the response of the reintroduced birds.

- 4. Habitat assessment:** FWP received several comments supporting the level of analysis completed regarding habitat. One comment received was critical of the assessment suggested that a coarse-scale habitat suitability model may not be sensitive enough to predict high quality winter habitat to sustain birds and recommended a more site-specific approach to winter habitat evaluation to increase chances for success.

FWP Response: FWP evaluated habitat at multiple levels. The coarse-scale habitat suitability index (HSI) model was only the first step in our evaluation to identify the areas of habitat with the highest suitability in western Montana. The results of the HSI were a surface with 30 m pixels with a score from 1-10 with 10 being the highest possible score. FWP wanted to be conservative in our approach so prior to moving to the next step of our analysis we removed all pixels that scored less than 5. We used the resulting map as the foundation for the second step of our analysis of fine scale habitat. During this step, we visited points throughout all of the proposed reintroduction sites to collect vegetation data directly related to brood survival, nest survival, and winter survival. We then compared this data to similar data collected in central Montana and found that in most cases finer scale habitat in western Montana was as good if not better than occupied habitat in central Montana. We recognize our sample sizes were small for the wintering habitat portion of our study; however, we remain confident that we have enough winter habitat to begin restoration of STGR. As we gain more information on how STGR use the western Montana landscape we will have the opportunity for habitat restoration projects that increase winter habitat in areas used by the reintroduced populations.

- 5. Opportunity to comment on the reintroduction plan:** FWP received one comment concerned about not having the opportunity to comment on the STGR Reintroduction plan that was completed in May 2017.

FWP Response: The [Restoration Plan for Sharp-tailed Grouse Recovery in Western Montana](#) was completed in May 2017 with the assistance of Montana State University. The purpose of the plan was to expand on habitat assessment work completed in 2015 with additional analysis in the form of PVAs which would provide FWP with more information regarding the feasibility of STGR reintroduction efforts. More specifically, the PVA within the plan evaluated 11 management scenarios that modified vital rates according to their response to management. Rather than evaluate the entire restoration plan and every management scenario, FWP chose to complete an

environmental assessment on only the scenarios that produce minimum viable populations that had a 95% probability of persisting for at least 50 years.

- 6. Cost and funding:** FWP received one comment that without costs of the reintroduction it was difficult to evaluate the cost effectiveness of the proposal. Another comment suggested FWP work with the NRD for funding habitat restoration and acquisitions. One commenter stated that if the project moves forward they could assist with funding.

FWP Response: FWP recognizes the importance of costs and funding for the reintroduction of STGR and will work with Wildlife Division Administrator and project staff to adequately evaluate the cost effectiveness of the reintroduction project and works with partners to secure funding prior to the implementation of the project.

- 7. Future hunting and outreach:** FWP received 5 comments regarding hunting and outreach of reintroduced populations. Four of those comments focused on the possibility of a huntable population of STGR in western Montana and the potential future opportunities for the sporting community. One comment focused on the need for FWP to make hunters aware of STGR presence to avoid accidental take. This comment also suggested that FWP avoid rushing to create a hunting season until there is certainty that the populations can withstand hunting.

FWP Response: The initial focus of the project is to establish viable STGR populations. Hunting STGR west of the Continental Divide may be possible in the future, but will require Fish and Wildlife Commission approval. FWP agrees that before any hunting of STGR is proposed, we will have to understand population dynamics and limiting factors that contributed to the long-term viability of the reintroduced populations. We also agree that an information and education campaign for Region 2 hunters is vital to avoid accidental take and, if reintroduction does occur, we will coordinate the sharing of this information with the hunting public.

- 8. Source population concerns:** FWP received 5 comments regarding source populations used for reintroduction efforts. It was recommended that FWP monitor source populations so that one existing population is not sacrificed inadvertently for the sake of another. One comment stated that the statewide decline in hunter harvest should be considered as it pertained to source leks in Regions 4-7 with the possibility of postponing reintroduction efforts to allow source populations to rebound. Another comment stated the EA adequately addressed concerns for the removal of too many source birds from existing leks; source birds need to come from stable populations. One comment suggested that FWP could increase the annual transplant size without noticeably impacting recreational harvest or grouse populations east of the Continental Divide.

FWP Response: If the project is approved, FWP will monitor demographic rates of relocated birds as well as birds remaining at source populations. While FWP believes that additional birds from source populations would likely not impact recreational harvest we are still sensitive to the concerns regarding the removal of STGR from eastern Montana during a period of declining hunter harvest. FWP is comfortable recommending the removal of the number of birds needed for this project, which is less than 1% of lowest harvest in the previous 5 years (2013-2017). FWP collaborated with a group of STGR researchers from Montana State University to develop protocols that limit impacts on source populations. Specifically, under Section 3.3 of the EA, we evaluate the effects of the project on source populations. "STGR are a lekking species where males gather at specific locations to compete for breeding with visiting females. At each lek, only a few dominant males do all the

breeding annually, so each year the majority of males are surplus. There are currently 241 mapped STGR leks with at least 15 males from lek survey data across Montana. This data represents a minimum estimate of STGR leks on the landscape. There are other leks that meet this criterion, but they are not included in this dataset. Only leks with at least 15 males will be considered as sources for reintroduction efforts as these leks are large enough to avoid deleterious effects of removals from the population and geographically diverse enough to provide genetic diversity and similar habitat structures to each of the proposed reintroduction sites."

9. **Recreational value:** FWP received 4 comments regarding reintroduced STGR populations on recreation in western Montana. "While I think hunting opportunities would be minimal, the viewing of lekking behavior would certainly be welcome by Western MT birders." "The opportunity to see a STGR while stalking a deer, calling to an elk or searching for sheds would add immensely to the experience and recreation value of western Montana." "Birders in particular would be thrilled to see Sharptails again in that area." "An increase in non-consumptive experiences is even more likely, with bird watchers, photographers, ecologists, tribes, and landowners enjoying the bird once again across the landscapes of western Montana."

FWP Response: This project embraces FWP's unifying message that the "The Outside Is In Us All." It is exciting, that as an agency, we have the capacity to conserve, protect, and enhance wildlife populations like STGR and renew the public's opportunity to experience STGR dancing once again in their former range.

10. **Conserved landscapes:** FWP received three comments regarding conservation landscapes specifically the Blackfoot Valley. These comments focused on the large amounts public land and of properties under conservation easement that could provide the extensive grasslands and shrublands required for STGR. They also mention the success of the Blackfoot Challenge in completing habitat restoration and protection as well as the success of the trumpeter swan reintroduction.

FWP Response: FWP recognizes the importance of working in landscapes where the community has demonstrated its role in conservation. The Blackfoot Challenge is a good example of this and FWP welcomes the opportunity to work with this group as well as the communities and groups in any area that may be approved for the reintroduction of STGR.

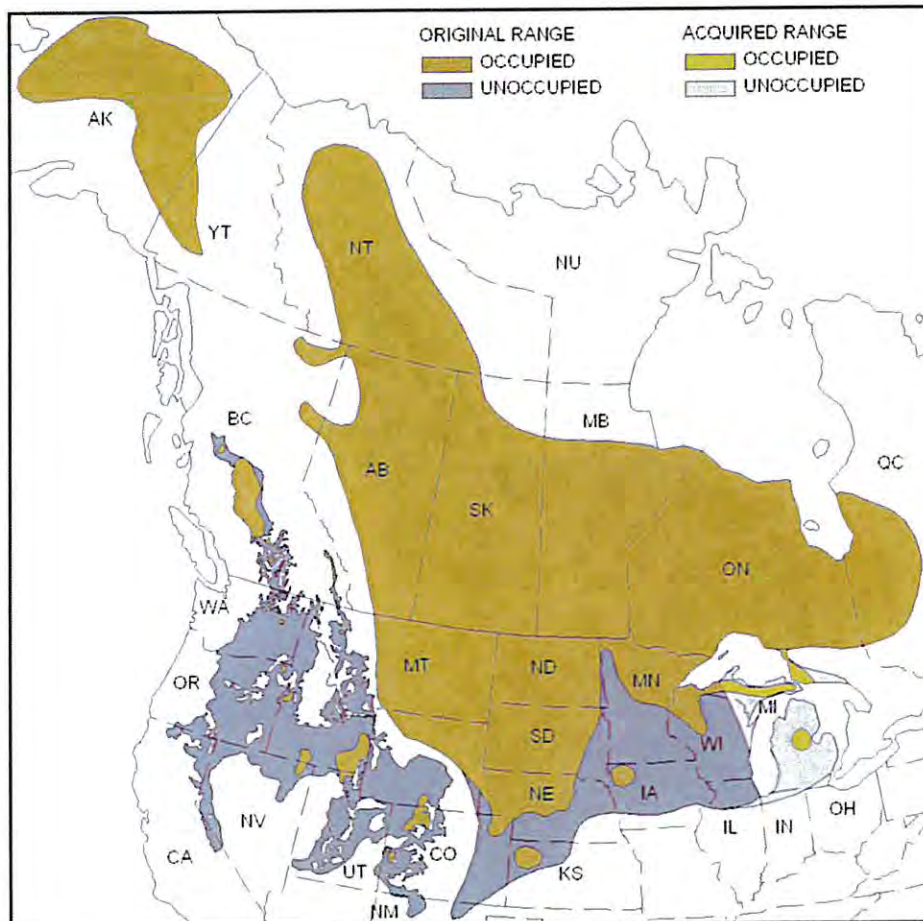
11. **Future consideration of other sites:** FWP should consider the following sites for reintroduction of STGR in the future: Spotted Dog, Flint Creek, and Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes land (Flathead Indian Reservation).

FWP Response: In our initial habitat assessment, FWP built a habitat suitability model for all of western Montana west of the Continental Divide to identify core areas of the best STGR habitat. Spotted Dog Wildlife Management Area, the Flint Creek Area, and the Flathead Indian Reservation all included suitable habitat, but were not areas of "high suitability" like the three proposed areas. If reintroductions to the areas evaluated in the EA were successful, FWP could consider additional sites. However, any new site proposed would have to undergo a new environmental assessment and chance for public input.

12. **Not a native species:** FWP received 3 comments stating that STGR were not a species of wildlife native to Montana. Two comments referred to the MT.gov Website as their source of information.

One of these comments accused FWP of creating the information on the webpage to show that STGR are native to Montana.

FWP Response: For a short time during the public comment period, the MT.gov Animal Field Guide site was down and the page for STGR stated there was no information on the species in the state. FWP worked with the Montana Natural Heritage Program to fix the webpage. After the webpage was fixed, FWP shared the link with the commenter. The commenter replied that there was nothing wrong with the page when they used it for information. FWP uses multiple sources of information to ensure the accuracy of our EAs. According to Schroeder et al. 2004, the STGR is the most widespread and common of the North American prairie grouse (see figure below). The following is a list of additional resources that indicate STGR are native to all parts of Montana: A Distribution List of the Birds of Montana with Notes on the Migration and Nesting of the Better-Known Species (Saunders and Bailey 1921); Distribution, Habitat Selection and Survival of Transplanted Columbian Sharp-tailed Grouse (*Tympanuchus phasianellus columbianus*) in the Tobacco Valley (Cope 1992); Conservation of Columbian Sharp-tailed Grouse, with Emphasis on the Upper Blackfoot Valley, Montana (Deeble 1996); Subspecific Identification of Sharp-tailed Grouse (*Tympanuchus phasianellus*) Samples from Montana (Warheit and Dean 2009); Montana's State Wildlife Action Plan (Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks 2015); and Birds of Montana (Marks et al. 2016).



Citations

- Cope, M. G. 1992. Distribution, habitat selection and survival of transplanted Columbian sharp-tailed grouse (*Tympanuchus phasianellus columbianus*) in the Tobacco Valley, Montana. Montana State University, Bozeman, MT, USA.
- Deeble, B. D. 1996. Conservation of Columbian sharp-tailed grouse, with special emphasis on the Upper Blackfoot Valley, Montana. University of Montana, Missoula, MT, USA.
- Marks, J. S., P. Hendricks, and D. Casey. 2016. Birds of Montana. Buteo Books, Arrington, Virginia.
- Saunders, A. A. and F. M. Bailey. 1921. A distributional list of the birds of Montana with notes on the migration and nesting of the better-known species. Pacific Coast Avifauna 14.
- Schroeder, M. A., R. K. Baydack, S. A. Harmon, C. A. Hagen, D. M. Davis, S. K. Sherrod, S. DeMaso, R. W. Hoffman, T. Z. Riley, J. B. Haufler, and R. R. Manes. 2004. North American grouse management plan. North American Grouse Partnership, Williamsport, Maryland, USA.
- Warheit, K. I. and C. A. Dean. 2009. Subspecific identification of sharp-tailed grouse (*Tympanuchus phasianellus*) samples from Montana. Report submitted to: Big Sky Upland Bird Association, Montana Department Fish, Wildlife and Parks, and Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes. Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife Molecular Genetics Laboratory, Olympia, WA, USA.

- 13. Sage Grouse (protected species) and take of private property versus STGR:** We received 4 comments regarding the conservation status of STGR. Two of those comments used STGR and sage grouse interchangeably. One comment objected to “adding another extremely expensive and time consuming endangered species to the already loaded list of plant and, animals, and fish.” Another comment stated that “Now that this species is consider protected in the state of Montana...”

FWP Response: Greater sage-grouse and STGR are two different species. STGR are not a state or federally listed species in Montana and are not tied to the Governor’s Executive Orders for the Montana Sage Grouse Conservation Strategy. Given STGR have no legislative protections taking of private property is not a concern with this project. STGR are common across areas east of the Continental Divide with a state status ranking of S4 (apparently secure). West of the Continental Divide STGR are considered a species of concern with a state status ranking of SX (presumed extinct or extirpated). If the reintroduction were successful, it is possible that the state status ranking would be reevaluated and upgraded to a lower risk status.

- 14. No public notice sent to adjoining landowners:** FWP received one comment regarding public notice. “FWP is corrupt by its illegal, secretive tactics. These tactics, which are being used, by way of: no public communication, no public notice sent to adjoining property owners or surround area property owners and no public announcements made prove my point that they wish to hide what they are implementing against the public and not for the public. Also, FWPS’ Covert method of planting the hidden and hard to find notice, and assessment on their website prove my point. Along with, the impossible hidden spot to make and read all comments written on this subject by the community. If they were above board and not using deceptive practice it would show by the ease to view all information and make public comments.”

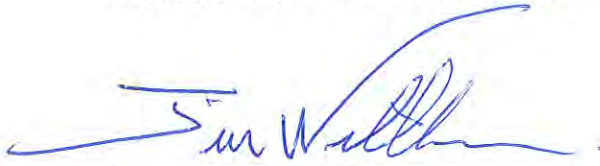
FWP Response: We have only identified broad landscapes over 5,000 hectares that have the highest habitat suitability and provide the greatest opportunity for successful reintroductions. We have also identified 214 leks that may serve as potential sources. Pending the Fish and Wildlife Commission’s decision, FWP will begin having conversations with all landowners in the project areas to prioritize

capture and relocation sites so that all landowners in the area are aware of our efforts. FWP posted a public notice on its webpage: <http://fwp.mt.gov>, a news release was prepared and distributed to a standard list of media outlets in all regions potentially affected by the project. The public were also notified with public notices in the *Flathead Beacon*, *Daily Inter Lake*, *Bozeman Chronicle*, *Great Falls Tribune*, *Missoulian*, *Billings Gazette*, *The Glasgow Courier*, *Havre Daily News*, *Miles City Star*, and *the Helena Independent Record*. The EA was released for a 30-day public comment period on February 15, 2019. The draft EA was also available at all FWP Regional Headquarters and the State Headquarters in Helena. The public can request all the information and public comments from FWP.

FWP Recommended Alternative and Final Decision Recommendation

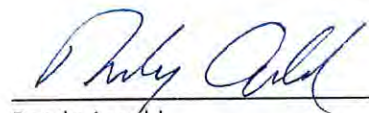
In reviewing all the public comments and other relevant information, and evaluating the environmental effects, we recommend that the Fish and Wildlife Commission approve Alternative B, Reintroduction of Sharp-tailed Grouse in the Blackfoot Valley, the Northern Bitterroot Valley, and the Drummond Area. FWP believes the completion of this alternative provides the best opportunity for returning self-sustaining, viable populations of STGR to western Montana.

Based on the draft EA, which has not identified any significant negative impacts by the proposed action to Montana's STGR population, an EIS is not required, an EA is the appropriate level of review. Noting and including the responses to public comments, the draft EA will become the final EA and together with this decision notice will serve as the final documents for this proposal.



Jim Williams
Region One Supervisor

4/4/2019
Date



Randy Arnold
Region Two Supervisor

4/3/2019
Date

Hammond, Christopher

From: jsjvash@montanasky.us
Sent: Saturday, March 16, 2019 11:09 PM
To: Hammond, Christopher
Subject: Public Comment: Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment Open to Public Comment

Categories: Public Comment

Name: Jim Vashro

City: Kalispell, MT

I previously submitted comments for Flathead Wildlife, Inc. One of our Board members, Jim Cross, who is a retired FWP wildlife biologist and manager, provided the additional comments below:

I can share with you that I have seen sharptail on the Blackfoot-Clearwater WMA, from Clearwater junction area through the Ovando valley, as far as the Washington-Nevada Creek area on the way to Avon. Ben Deeble, when doing some broad surveys for abundance and distribution in the early 70's, noted the birds also in areas east of Helmville. No doubt the Blackfoot area may have the highest potential to augment any residual, scattered populations but a cursory examination of habitats when I was there did not identify any real reasons that the birds should not have prospered even in small numbers. Does not mean a reintroduction should not be considered but there seems to be some limitations on why sharptails have not remained throughout that area even in small numbers. Jim C
Jim's comments raise the question why sharptail grouse persisted for centuries but appear extirpated in recent years. What changed to limit survival, what is the limiting factor(s).

This e-mail was generated from the 'Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment Open to Public Comment' Public Notice Web Page.

Hammond, Christopher

From: jsjvash@montanasky.us
Sent: Friday, March 15, 2019 11:16 PM
To: Hammond, Christopher
Subject: Public Comment: Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment Open to Public Comment

Categories: Public Comment

Name: Jim Vashro

City: Kalispell

Board members from Flathead Wildlife, Inc. have reviewed the proposed sharptail grouse reintroduction proposal. Flathead Wildlife, Inc. (FWI) is the largest sportsmen club in northwest Montana. While the proposed reintroduction areas are out of northwest Montana, FWI followed and supported the Tobacco Plains recovery effort and FWI has interests in statewide recovery programs.

Flathead Wildlife, Inc. supports Alternative E, reintroduction focusing on the Blackfoot Valley. Considering the number of STGR that could be trapped and relocated each year, concentrating on one area could increase the chances of success. The Blackfoot has community organization in the form of the Blackfoot Challenge which will provide support and education on the project. The amount of protected (CE) land is also a plus. The presence of historical data on STGR abundance distribution and leks will also allow relocated birds to be placed in the best available habitat. Jim Vashro, President, Flathead Wildlife, Inc.

This e-mail was generated from the 'Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment Open to Public Comment' Public Notice Web Page.

Hammond, Christopher

From: Chris Marchion <cjmarshion@outlook.com>
Sent: Friday, March 15, 2019 4:13 PM
To: Hammond, Christopher
Subject: Sharp-tailed grouse Reintroduction to Western Montana

Categories: Public Comment

Please accept these comments on behalf of the Anaconda Sportsmen's Club. We recently became aware that Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks is considering reintroduction of sharp-tailed grouse to our portion of Southwest Montana. We have not been given any formal presentation nor have we received any information from our Region 2 FWP biologists but our club's history has been supportive of restoring and managing all of our native species. Sharp-tail grouse qualify.

We support reintroduction in the three locations (Bitterroot, Blackfoot, and Flint Creek valleys). We would hope that suitable habitat could be found in the Deer Lodge valley as an additional site. Perhaps the Spotted Dog WMA. In the past we received updates from Ben Deeble on the population in the Ovando area which eventually disappeared so we have some familiarity with efforts to retain this species.

As this project moves forward we would appreciate a formal presentation on the reintroduction and future management plans.

Chris Marchion
Director, Anaconda Sportsmen Club
2105 Garfield
Anaconda, MT. 59711
Phone: (home) 406-563-6145

Hammond, Christopher

From: Bob and Joyce Schroeder <schroeder_ranch@yahoo.com>
Sent: Friday, March 15, 2019 2:01 PM
To: Hammond, Christopher
Subject: Sharp tail recovery

Categories: Public Comment

Mr. Hammond, I want to go on record as strongly supporting any Sharpie tail recovery efforts made in western Montana, plan B. The Schroeder family has ranched in the north Bitterroot valley since homestead, 1880's and was the owner of the now MPG ranch until 2008. My great grandfather and grandfather both told me of the " prairie chickens" that were on the east side of the Bitterroot's.

The MPG ranch has the will, the biologists, and financial vigor to help in this important endeavor. Anything that I can personally do to help in this effort I will consider. Hoping to see Sharpies again.

Best regards Bob Schroeder

[Sent from Yahoo Mail for iPad](#)

Hammond, Christopher

From: Chad Harvey <charvey@pheasantsforever.org>
Sent: Friday, March 15, 2019 12:42 PM
To: Hammond, Christopher
Subject: Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction
Attachments: PF_Sharptial_Reintro_Support_2019_03_15.docx

Categories: Public Comment

Chris,

Attached is Pheasants Forever public letter of support for the proposed re-introduction of Sharp-tailed Grouse in Western Montana. Sorry for submitting at the 11th hour, but wanted to give our chapter leaders in Montana an opportunity to share their opinions. Overwhelmingly, I'd say we are excited about the opportunity to have these birds back in historic range.

If you have any other questions, don't hesitate to reach out.

Thanks!

Chad Harvey | Regional Rep – Montana, Canada

Pheasants Forever | 777 Swan Hwy | Bigfork, MT 59911

C: (503) 957-2634 | charvey@pheasantsforever.org | www.montanapf.org | [Facebook](#)



March 15, 2019

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
490 North meridian Rd; Kalispell, MT
ATTN: Chris Hammond

In reference to the recent Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Proposal, Pheasants Forever publicly supports the plan to reintroduce the Sharp-Tailed Grouse to historic native ranges in Western Montana.

Establishing a sustainable population of Sharp-tailed Grouse in Western Montana strongly aligns with our organization mission to aide in the conservation of upland birds and other wildlife through habitat improvements, public awareness, education, and land management policies and programs.

With the support of nearly 2500 active members in Montana, Pheasants Forever looks forward to working with Montana Fish, Wildlife, & Parks on restoration efforts for one of our state's most iconic upland birds.

Sincerely,

Chad Harvey
Pheasants Forever Regional Representative - Montana

Hammond, Christopher

From: Alec Underwood <alec@mtwf.org>
Sent: Friday, March 15, 2019 11:20 AM
To: Hammond, Christopher
Subject: Sharp-tailed Grouse Environmental Assessment comments
Attachments: MWF Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction comments.pdf

Categories: Public Comment

Chris,

Please see the attached comments from the Montana Wildlife Federation on the Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment. Thanks for the opportunity to comment.

Regards,

Alec Underwood
Western Field Representative
Montana Wildlife Federation

Alec Underwood
Western Field Representative
Montana Wildlife Federation
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www.montanawildlife.org



Protecting Montana's wildlife,
land, waters and hunting & fishing
heritage for future generations.

March 15th, 2019

Chris Hammond
Sharp-tailed Reintroduction Environmental Assessment
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
490 North Meridian Road
Kalispell, MT 59901

Dear Mr. Hammond,

The Montana Wildlife Federation (MWF) is Montana's oldest and largest sportsmen-wildlife conservation organization. We work to protect Montana's public lands, clean waters, and abundant fish and wildlife for the benefit of the hundreds of thousands of Montanans and people all over the nation who hunt, fish, and value Montana's outdoor heritage. I would like to submit the following comments on the Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment.

MWF supports the reintroduction of Sharp-tailed Grouse (STGR) to habitat located in Western Montana. Proposed alternatives B, C, D, and E involve reintroduction. However, we believe that Alternative B will provide the necessary information for the department to achieve a successful reintroduction and long term population viability. For habitat quality assessments, the three proposed reintroduction sites offer different strengths and weaknesses. The upper Blackfoot Valley represents the most quality habitat and best chance for successful reintroduction. The Drummond and Northern Bitterroot Valley sites offer contrasting habitat quality for brood-rearing and nesting habitat. We suggest Alternative B, reintroduction to all three areas, would be most advantageous in understanding habitat needs and informing future restoration efforts.

Although the Environmental Assessment (EA) determined that there would be no population level effects in source populations in regions 4-7, one potential concern is the decline in statewide harvest (shown in figure 6 of the EA). This decline should be considered in the decision making process as it pertains to the collection of STGR from different leks in regions 4-7, with the possibility of postponing reintroduction efforts to allow source populations to rebound.

The addition of STGR to Western Montana will benefit other species through potential habitat restoration to assist reintroduced populations. Additionally, providing successful reintroduction, new hunting opportunities may occur which will benefit the sporting community. Seeing that there has been no hunting for STGR in Western Montana since 1948, this is an exciting prospect for upland bird hunters. Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Dave Chadwick". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Dave Chadwick
Executive Director

Hammond, Christopher

From: Cherin Spencer-Bower <cherinspencerbower@gmail.com>
Sent: Thursday, March 14, 2019 9:58 PM
To: Hammond, Christopher
Subject: Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction

Categories: Public Comment

Hello Chris Hammond,

I am writing to express my support in the reintroducing of sharp-tailed grouse to areas of Montana. I believe that Alternative B, for reintroduction at all sites, is the best choice for this project to succeed. I am familiar with the area as a staff member of MPG Ranch and I am highly confident they will be managed with professionalism and protected in this area. Sharp-tailed grouse may do well in this habitat after what I experienced with Gunnison's sage grouse habitat restoration projects I worked on in the Gunnison basin in 2011 and what I learned about grouse habitat.

Thank you,

Cherin Spencer-Bower
Ecologist/Filmmaker
MPG Ranch

Hammond, Christopher

From: Bestwest@live.com <Bestwest@live.com>
Sent: Thursday, March 14, 2019 7:03 PM
To: Hammond, Christopher
Subject: Public Comment: Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment Open to Public Comment

Categories: Public Comment

Name:

City:

I strongly object to adding another extremely expensive and time consuming endangered species to the already loaded list of plants and, animals, and fish. Plus endangering all the predators that might cause a new species harm.

This e-mail was generated from the 'Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment Open to Public Comment' Public Notice Web Page.

Hammond, Christopher

From: lgwhunter@gmail.com
Sent: Thursday, March 14, 2019 11:03 AM
To: Hammond, Christopher
Subject: Public Comment: Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment Open to Public Comment

Categories: Public Comment

Name:

City:

I fully support the reintroduction of Sharp-tailed Grouse into any and all suitable habitat on the west side of the state. The opportunity to establish a huntable population would be a tremendous benefit.

This e-mail was generated from the 'Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment Open to Public Comment' Public Notice Web Page.

Hammond, Christopher

From: rleach-2@bresnan.net
Sent: Thursday, March 14, 2019 10:12 AM
To: Hammond, Christopher
Cc: 'fvasboard@googlegroups.com'
Subject: comments on the Sharp-tailed Grouse EA
Attachments: letter re sharp-tailed gr.pdf

Categories: Public Comment

Hi Chris,

Thanks for sending me your paper in press, that was very helpful. As requested, I have not shared it with anyone.

Attached you will find our comments on your proposal. My printer is about out of ink, so I have included an electronic signature on this one. I will print the letter and send the original to your office, too, but it will look sort of gray instead of black! Also, it might not get there until after the 17th, and we wanted to meet your deadline for our comments.

Good luck with your project, our Chapter hopes for your success.

Thanks for your time, Rose Leach, 5 Valleys Audubon.

FIVE VALLEYS AUDUBON SOCIETY
P.O. BOX 8425
MISSOULA, MT 59807

14 March 2019



Chris Hammond, MT FWP

Comments related to the Draft Environmental Assessment,
Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction, February 2019, due 17 March
2019.

Five Valleys Audubon supports efforts to re-establish native birds to areas of the state where they have been extirpated. That said, conventional thought on reintroduction is usually along the lines of, 'let's figure out why the birds winked out in the first place, to increase our chances of success'. Your proposal has taken a different approach, which we hope is successful, but based on the information in the EA, this is difficult to determine.

It may be that the approach used in the EA—to compare sites where the species currently occurs in eastern Montana, to sites proposed for reintroduction—may indeed be an appropriate predictor for success. However, the method used to evaluate the habitats—that of a coarse-scale Habitat Suitability Model—might not be sensitive enough to predict if there will be enough high quality winter habitat to sustain the birds. We believe that a more site-specific approach to winter habitat evaluation would increase the chances for success. Moreover, the proposal did not seem to include the costs of reintroduction and of the likely necessary future habitat improvement to sustain the birds. Therefore, it is difficult to assess the cost-effectiveness of the proposal. Perhaps the mitigation needs from damages caused by Libby dam outweigh the fleshing out of other bird conservation proposals; that is possible. It is just difficult to determine, based on the information included.

We hope that you will receive these comments in the spirit in which we have provided them—that we support conservation and want to spend our resources wisely in achieving those goals. And yes, we may be late in evaluating the proposal, but because there was apparently no MEPA compliance on the final Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Plan (May 2017), we did not have an earlier opportunity to provide public comments. Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully,

Rosemary H. Leach

Rosemary H. Leach
President, Five Valleys Audubon Society
Certified Wildlife Biologist and NEPA Specialist

Hammond, Christopher

From: antiqueology@aol.com
Sent: Wednesday, March 13, 2019 5:07 PM
To: Hammond, Christopher
Subject: Public Comment: Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment Open to Public Comment

Categories: Public Comment

Name: Sashin Hume

City: Florence

I am completely and utterly against this environmental assessment to introduce the Sharp Tailed Grouse into Western Montana, The Bitterroot, and MPG Ranch.

For these factual reasons:

- Various pinticle points made by any written proof by the FWP is full of deception and non credible facts. For instance, the Sharp Tailed Grouse has never been historically native to Western Montana and the Bitterroot Valley, as stated in all the FWPs' drafts. Also look at above heading of draft 02/15/2019 "Species Removal and Relocation" This even proves my point. FWP in their heading of the proof dated 02/15-2019, states it is an animal that is to be removed from some where else and RE Located to our home! Factually, the Sharp Tailed Grouse is native to Canada and Eastern Montana, and Idaho. Canada, Eastern Montana, and Idaho are very different habitats. This is therefore a NEW INTRODUCTION to Western Mt. and Bitterroot Valley!

-The Montana State site had stated in their field guide, "The Sharp Tailed Grouse is not Native to Montana" When head biologist was notified of the true history of the bird and contradiction to the FWPs position, it was quickly changed to support FWP's theory .

-Part of FWPS disgusting plan allows them to wipe out and kill any and all predators of The Sharp Tailed Grouse bird eggs. This includes: Endangered protected eagles, red tailed hawks, falcons, turkey buzzards, great horned owls, red fox, badgers, wheasles, bob cats, racoons, skunks, coyotes, wolves (smart that they just introduced wolves on MPG, only to be able to kill them, when they eat some Grouse eggs!)

- One would think the above reasons were bad enough, however, lets talk about the worst problem with FWPs' attempt to newly introduce the Sharp Tailed Grouse into Western Mt. and The Bitterroot Valley. This is the impact that it has on property owners, farmers and ranchers. We all agree, It is not an easy place to make a living and a home. Factually, since the mid to late 1800's Western Montana has been historically an agricultural state supporting families livelihoods. this would be strongly impacted by a taking of use if your property and properties close to yours had any Sharp Tailed Grouse found on it. Not to mention birds, eggs, and nests could easily be deposited on certain prizes piece of land that FWP would like to get its hands on. The Governors' enactment actually legally allows for this to be done! It is a takings at the maximum. Sound like communist Russia not Montana in America!

-FWP is corrupt by its illegal, secretive tactics. These tactics, which are being used, by way of: no public communication, no public notice sent to adjoining property owners or surround area property owners and no public announcements made prove my point that they wish to hide what they are implementing against the public not for the public. Also FWPS' Covert method of planting the hidden and hard to find notice, and assessment on their website prove my point. Along with, the impossible hidden spot to make and read all comments written on this subject by the community. If they were above board and not using deceptive practice it would show by the ease to view all information and make public comments.

In closing even the great Sally Jewel ,Head of Dept. of Interior stated, "To list the Sage Grouse as endangered species, (all sub-species) would be to ruin all farmers and ranchers across America". How much more does a level headed intelligent person need to see how ridiculous and hurtful this would be to Western Montana and The Bitterroot Valley?

Pretend Montana is an airplane and we are going down, what does the air stewardess teach us about the oxygen masks? She say "Put your mask on first so you have the ability to help other put their masks on." How can we human damage our property rights, economy, family future, destroy family historical use such as haying, watering, subdividing, building,

grazing all animals, basically everything Montana is known for. For the sake of a newly introduced, non endangered species not native to Western Montana and The Bitterroot Valley,
Signed Family Member Abutting MPG, Sashin Hume

This e-mail was generated from the 'Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment Open to Public Comment' Public Notice Web Page.

Hammond, Christopher

From: Gary Moses <mobilt13@gmail.com>
Sent: Wednesday, March 13, 2019 10:55 AM
To: Hammond, Christopher
Subject: Sharptail Grouse Restoration

Categories: Public Comment

Chris,

I am not sure how I missed this previously! I learned about the proposal at the Board Meeting of Flathead Pheasants Forever last night, and just reviewed the proposal.

As both a conservationist and bird hunter, I would love to see sharp tails restored west of the divide. My only concern, which I am sure FWP shares, is that if the proposal moves forward, birds captured for relocation come from very stable populations. I perceive that the last two or three years weather has been very hard on birds along the northern tier of MT, as evidenced from the tough hunting conditions I and several others have had recently.

I also would like to volunteer to help with capture and release efforts if the program moves ahead. Several other Flathead PF members stated the same offer of assistance at the meeting last night.

Thanks for your efforts both on this and other projects, like the Harlequin work you do! I hope to see you in the field.

Gary Moses
Kalispell

Hammond, Christopher

From: Becky Peters <rpeters@montana.com>
Sent: Monday, March 11, 2019 10:26 PM
To: Hammond, Christopher
Subject: STGR_Bitterroot_Audubon Sharp Tailed Grouse reintroduction letter!
Attachments: STGR_Bitterroot_Audubon Sharp Tailed Grouse reintroduction letter!.docx

Categories: Public Comment

Dear Mr. Hammond!

Thank you for your work on this proposal! We look forward to seeing this magnificent animal back in the Bitterroot!

Becky Peters

This email has been checked for viruses by Avast antivirus software.

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.avast.com%2Fantivirus&data=02%7C01%7Cchammond%40mt.gov%7Cc671e183b0d9432031a308d6a6a2eb66%7C07a94c98f30f4abbbd7ed63f8720dc02%7C0%7C0%7C636879616945565711&sdata=ssuOvJhl7kzY9vew70bUDB8tFpMyHSFj8r3Onlh1h0w%3D&reserved=0>

Hammond, Christopher

From: pramsey@mpgranch.com
Sent: Monday, March 11, 2019 3:57 PM
To: Hammond, Christopher
Subject: Public Comment: Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment Open to Public Comment

Categories: Public Comment

Name: Philip Wharton Ramsey

City: Missoula

I am in favor of 2.3.2 Alternative B.

This e-mail was generated from the 'Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment Open to Public Comment' Public Notice Web Page.

Hammond, Christopher

From: Ben Deeble <bddeeble@gmail.com>
Sent: Monday, March 11, 2019 11:27 AM
To: Hammond, Christopher
Cc: Lewis and Lynda Young; Wood, Alan; Beau Larkin; Cross, Todd B -FS; Jay Gore; Glenn Marangelo; Bob Jeffrey; Tom Deveny; Bob Hayler
Subject: Big Sky Upland Bird Assoc. cmts on STG reintroduction
Attachments: BSUBAcmts_STGreintro_final.pdf

Categories: Public Comment

Hey Chris:

See attached the Big Sky Upland Bird Association's comments on the proposal to reintroduce Sharp-tailed Grouse to Western Montana.

Editorial note: your pubic doc incorrectly names us as the Big Sky Upland GAME Bird Association in a couple places.

I saw the new article in the Ravalli Republic, and I am happy to hear you have been getting positive comments so far. Perry did a good job, except I was disappointed he didn't mention the decade-long sportsmen or BSUBA participation at all. Can we attempt to balance this in future media coverage about the reintro effort? Would you like to do an outreach together to newspapers like the Butte Standard or others? Has anybody asked for a public meeting?

The only rancher I've failed to connect with is Jake Geary in Ovando. I used to know his father and uncle (Bill and Tommy) now deceased. He is the new manager of that property which had one of the last leks south of Browns Lake. Let me know if there are any other ways I can help.

Regards,
Ben Deeble



BIG SKY UPLAND BIRD

A S S O C I A T I O N

P.O. Box 9005 • MISSOULA, MT 59807-9005

Date: 3/11/19

To: Chris Hammond, Region 1 biologist, 490 North Meridian Road, Kalispell, MT 59901

Email: chammond@mt.gov

RE: **Big Sky Upland Bird Association comments on Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction to Western Montana**

For over a decade, the Big Sky Upland Bird Association (BSUBA) has been working with state and federal agencies, tribal representatives, and landowners toward the reintroduction of Sharp-tailed Grouse to Western Montana. We have helped fund initial habitat restoration evaluation and genetic analyses, conducted searches for remnant breeding populations, and participated in numerous meetings with stakeholders to find a path forward towards a viable reintroduction plan.

West of the Continental Divide in Montana there has been no hunting season for Sharp-tailed Grouse since 1948, at the latest, and the last isolated populations of the species disappeared some time between the 1980's and 2000. With recent restoration of breeding populations of Trumpeter Swan and recent Burrowing Owl breeding in Ravalli county, the Sharp-tailed Grouse is the only historically common breeding bird presently missing from Western Montana. Reestablishment of this species to Western Montana would be a historic conservation achievement.

The board of BSUBA supports adoption of Alternative B, reintroduction of Sharp-tailed Grouse to three locations in western Montana (the Bitterroot Valley, the Blackfoot Valley, and the Drummond Area). We support this Alternative because it disperses the threat to the persistence of translocated individuals due to local stochastic events (environmental or biotic) while allowing for monitoring of translocation success at each of the multiple sites, including possible identification of factors contributing to or limiting population reestablishment. Alternative B also offers the potential to establish a metapopulation among the Blackfoot and nearby Flint Creek valleys.

We are particularly enthusiastic about the Blackfoot Valley as a reintroduction site because (if the Ovando and Helmville areas are combined, and there is no biological reason they shouldn't be), it represents the greatest area of habitat capable of supporting the largest potential sharptail population, estimated at over 1,500 grouse. We also support the Blackfoot Valley because it was most recently occupied by Sharp-tailed Grouse, and landowners there voice support in initial discussions about grouse reintroduction. For example, last month during discussions with Tracy Manley of the Manley Ranch south of Helmville, he volunteered his property as a potential reintroduction site. He estimates that approximately 10,000 acres of his ranch is suitable grassland-sage habitat and speculated that a neighboring ranch may be agreeable to reintroductions as well. We are confident that well-considered approaches to other landowners, particularly those who have been engaged in community conservation

Dedicated to:

Improving habitat for all upland birds; Opening more land to the public; Encouraging ethical hunting and good relationships with landowners and managing agencies; Educating and informing upland bird hunters and fostering friendships among them.

efforts for decades via the Blackfoot Challenge, will identify additional large landowners similarly receptive to reintroduction plans and follow-up monitoring.

However, if some or all of the currently proposed location options lose favor, we would encourage coordinating with the Natural Resource Damage (NRD) program to consider additional habitats acquired or enhanced through NRD funds in the Deer Lodge Valley (Spotted Dog WMA, Opportunity reclamation lands, lower Lost Creek, etc.), other public lands in the region (Blackfoot-Clearwater WMA and various federal and state lands), and to again approach the CSK tribes for consideration of their lands for inclusion in the reintroduction effort. The NRD should also be considered as a source of potential substantial funding for grouse reintroduction work in the Clark Fork drainage, as should FWP's Upland Game Bird Habitat Enhancement Program's hunter-generated funds, and the MPG Ranch.

BSUBA is foremost an organization of conservation-minded upland bird hunters. So, it is relevant to us that bird hunters travel to central and eastern Montana to pursue sharptails, where harvest estimates range from ~25,000 to 55,000 annually over the past fifteen years. In our opinion, reintroduction efforts which would transplant 180 grouse annually to western Montana represent less than 1% of the annual hunter harvest even in "low" bird years. Therefore, with safeguards limiting over-trapping at individual leks, in our opinion the annual transplant size could be even higher without noticeably impacting recreational harvest or grouse populations east of the Continental Divide.

Reestablishment of Sharp-tailed Grouse to Western Montana would represent a major victory in restoring the full complement of our historic avifauna. Success may encourage other collaborators such as tribal land managers, landowners, and federal land managers to consider their own conservation efforts for benefit of the species. If reintroduction is fantastically successful, the Montana Fish and Wildlife Commission may even consider reestablishing an appropriate hunting season for this sought-after game bird in the western valleys of the state. An increase in non-consumptive experiences is even more likely, with bird watchers, photographers, ecologists, tribes, and landowners enjoying the bird once again across the landscapes of Western Montana. Regardless of the success of reestablishing a self-supporting population of Sharp-tailed Grouse in Western Montana, the project will likely deliver new scientific insights into the requirements of this iconic species in today's intermountain sagebrush-steppe habitats.

Sincerely,



Ben Deeble, president

for:

Glenn Marangelo, Sec./Tres.; Board Members: Jay Gore, Todd Cross, Robert Jeffrey, Bob Hayler, Tom Deveny

Hammond, Christopher

From: Phil Barton <grouse.guy@hotmail.com>
Sent: Sunday, March 10, 2019 1:22 PM
To: Hammond, Christopher
Subject: sharptail grouse reintroduction

Categories: Public Comment

Hi Chris; just wanted to let you know that i whole heartedly endorse the proposal to reintroduce sharptails to western montana. keep up the good work sincerely phil barton

Hammond, Christopher

From: adam.norcutt@gmail.com
Sent: Friday, March 8, 2019 12:48 PM
To: Hammond, Christopher
Subject: Public Comment: Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment Open to Public Comment

Categories: Public Comment

Name: Adam Norcutt

City: Manhattan, MT

As a extremely avid upland bird hunter and one who travels all corners of the state for both work and hunting, I think there is great opportunity in the western part of the state to reintroduce the Sharp-tailed grouse. In regions I see strong populations of STGR, I see similarities in certain pockets of the western part of the state where these great birds could succeed. If success can be reached in NW Minnesota (which I view to be significantly sub par habitat compared to western Montana) to grow populations of STGR, I would strongly pursue a reintroduction of these birds in western Montana. <https://sharptails.org/blog/sharp-tailed-grouse-conservation/bringing-back-the-sharptail>. In reading the reintroduction documents, the areas selected appear to be well researched, quality areas to reintroduce these birds. Achieving a hunt-able population of these birds should be FWP's end goal, and I truly feel the research and strategy has been well thought out to get to this point, and moving forward to reintroduce these birds, should happen. Please contact me if there is anything I can do to help with this project. Thank you

This e-mail was generated from the 'Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment Open to Public Comment' Public Notice Web Page.

Hammond, Christopher

From: Sean Boushie <flintlocknfur@hotmail.com>
Sent: Friday, March 8, 2019 9:51 AM
To: Hammond, Christopher
Subject: Sharpies

Categories: Public Comment

Hi Chris, Just read the article about Sharpie reintroductions in the Biteroot.

I live on Grandview Drive, off of the Eastside Hwy between Florence and Stevi. Just an FI, there is a definite group of Sharpies that roam this area. I keep my 2 acres natural grass, and they frequently roam through. Most likely they roam up from Lee Metcalf refuge. I see them several times a month in the better weather.

I reported this to local FWP, they didn't believe me.

Im an East side bird hunter, so I know what they are, Ive shot more than a few. I have a BS in Wildlife Biology, and I work at the University of Montana.

Sean B

Hammond, Christopher

From: dave@daveheine.com
Sent: Friday, March 8, 2019 9:26 AM
To: Hammond, Christopher
Subject: Public Comment: Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment Open to Public Comment

Categories: Public Comment

Name: Dave Heine

City: Kalispell

I'm very excited to see FWP considering this proposal to expand sharp tail numbers what's going on and the areas they exist. Please let the bird hunting community know how we can help.

This e-mail was generated from the 'Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment Open to Public Comment' Public Notice Web Page.

Hammond, Christopher

From: Megan Lester <megan@whitefishstage.farm>
Sent: Thursday, March 7, 2019 4:51 PM
To: Hammond, Christopher
Subject: Sharp-Tailed Grouse

Categories: Public Comment

Dear Sir,

I am writing to you to show my support for the reintroduction of Sharp-tailed Grouse in western Montana.

As a life long Montana resident and enthusiastic bird hunter I have spent many days a field in central and eastern Montana chasing Sharp-tailed Grouse. Most of the time I did this with a gun in hand and lately more with a camera. Nothing signifies the changing of seasons from winter to spring quite like watching Sharp-tailed Grouse dancing on their leks.

As a recent resident to western Montana, (Kalispell) I have heard stories of Sharp-tailed Grouse in the past, inhabiting different areas in western Montana. There are certainly areas with some beautiful grass lands suitable for these wonderful birds in many of these western valleys.

Again I am very pleased to see MT Fish, Wildlife, and Parks considering restoring these native grouse to some of their historic range. Thank you for your consideration.

Best regards,

Jeff Waldum
PO Box 3372
Kalispell, MT 59903
406-220-6841

Hammond, Christopher

From: avott1@hotmail.com
Sent: Thursday, March 7, 2019 12:09 PM
To: Hammond, Christopher
Subject: Public Comment: Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment Open to Public Comment

Categories: Public Comment

Name: Dr. Tova Sardot

City: Florence

Mr. Hammond,

I own 20 acres adjoining the MPG property in Florence and I am deeply concerned about the reintroduction of the sharp-tailed grouse. Now that this species is considered protected in the state of Montana, any new placement of this species will unjustly impact the rights of all land owners in the area and devalue the land. This is unacceptable. I implore you to stop any placement of this bird in this area and seriously consider the negative effects it will have on the livelihoods of residents.

This e-mail was generated from the 'Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment Open to Public Comment' Public Notice Web Page.

Hammond, Christopher

From: Niki Sardot <dvinepalettepaintnsip@gmail.com>
Sent: Thursday, March 7, 2019 10:55 AM
To: Hammond, Christopher
Subject: Re: Public Comment: Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment Open to Public Comment

Categories: Public Comment

There was no problem with the snapshot I took of [Mt.Gov](#) Field Guide website: the problem is with the nemesis of your assessment.

False historical b.s.
Keep digging a hole.

Sent from my iPhone

On Mar 7, 2019, at 9:53 AM, Hammond, Christopher <CHammond@mt.gov> wrote:

Hello Niki,

I want to thank you for bringing to my attention problem with information from the [MT.gov](#) website. I was able to contact the person responsible for the website and they were able fix the problem and the website is now functioning properly (<http://fieldguide.mt.gov/speciesDetail.aspx?elcode=ABNLC13030>). I will address the remainder of your comment in our decision notice. Please feel free to contact me should you have additional concerns or comments.

Sincerely,

Chris

Chris Hammond
Wildlife Biologist
Wildlife Division
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Region 1

490 N. Meridian Road
Kalispell, MT 59901
Ph: (406) 751-4582
[Montana FWP](#) | [Montana Outdoors Magazine](#)

<image001.png>

From: dvinepalettepaintnsip@gmail.com [<mailto:dvinepalettepaintnsip@gmail.com>]
Sent: Wednesday, March 6, 2019 8:56 PM
To: Hammond, Christopher <CHammond@mt.gov>
Subject: Public Comment: Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment Open to Public Comment

Name: Niki Sardot

City: Florence (Missoula County)

Mr. Hammond,

Please accept my comments on the Sharp Tailed Grouse.

The [Mt.Gov](#) FIELD GUIDE states that the Sharp Tailed Grouse has never existed in the State of Montana. The question I pose to all that read this is why the lies? The historical, the native...etc. I was the sole landowner two sessions ago at the Governors push through of the Sage Grouse Implementation Act. The then head o Dept. of Interior understood and stated that if she declared the Grouse endangered, it would destroy farmers and rancher property values across the U.S. Our Governor didn't care and went ahead. I understand its' impact (another Spotted Owl fiasco) on our State and property rights. Adjoining landowners will be hurt financially, told how to graze, how high their fences are, eggs will somehow be planted on their land making it impossible to grow, subdivide, build on...A TAKINGS...FWP will have the right to void huge swaths of native animals; fox, ravens, skunks, weasels, badgers, coyotes, bobcats, hawks, endangered eagles, turkey buzzards (endangered)...all for a bird not native, that can't survive in Western Montanas' open grasslands (no predator cover) or forest. In conclusion, this action is not a recovery, reintroduction or reclamation project but a NEW species being introduced, killing of native animals, with an emphasis on adjoining landowners participation by giving up historical grazing rights, being told to change out fences to lower height, "You are now in the designated Grouse nesting area and won't be able to build, hay, subdivide, use heavy equipment, graze cows, horses," by Missoula County Planning Dept. I believe this is a TEST SITE for Montana, and the rest of the U.S. is watching. The goal is to use whatever means to return wild. Yukon to Yucatan. My ranch backs up to the 21,000 Acre MPG Ranch. . . the 2nd choice area due to poor habitat. I will never support this action for the above reasons.

This e-mail was generated from the 'Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment Open to Public Comment' Public Notice Web Page.

Hammond, Christopher

From: montanaskier <montanaskier@hotmail.com>
Sent: Thursday, March 7, 2019 9:42 AM
To: Hammond, Christopher
Subject: Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction

Categories: Public Comment

I simply want to voice my support for Alternative B of the DEA for Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction. I hope to see the efforts of all involved come to fruition with a thriving population of these birds in our area in the near future.

Thank you,
Michael Ormandy

Missoula, MT

Hammond, Christopher

From: skipwillard@eatel.net
Sent: Thursday, March 7, 2019 8:17 AM
To: Hammond, Christopher
Subject: Public Comment: Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment Open to Public Comment

Categories: Public Comment

Name: WILLIAM EDWARD WILLARD

City: Florence

Provided that none of the predator wildlife is going to be harmed or removed from the areas of reintroduction I would be in favor of doing so. My property abuts the MPG ranch and I have found that the property manager is extremely difficult to deal with and attempts to intimidate all of the property owners surrounding the MPG.

This e-mail was generated from the 'Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment Open to Public Comment' Public Notice Web Page.

Hammond, Christopher

From: keithb@montana.com
Sent: Thursday, March 7, 2019 6:22 AM
To: Hammond, Christopher
Subject: Public Comment: Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment Open to Public Comment

Categories: Public Comment

Name: Keith Baer

City: Missoula

The sharp tailed grouse, according to much scientific research, is not native to the area. There are massive failures where ever nonnative species are introduced. The cain toads introduced in Australia are killing off native species. The beavers in southern Argentina are killing the forest. Both introductions were done for very positive, albeit not very well thought out, reasons. We need to learn from numerous past mistakes and say no to this nonsense

This e-mail was generated from the 'Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment Open to Public Comment' Public Notice Web Page.

Hammond, Christopher

From: dvinepalettepaintnsip@gmail.com
Sent: Wednesday, March 6, 2019 8:56 PM
To: Hammond, Christopher
Subject: Public Comment: Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment Open to Public Comment

Categories: Public Comment

Name: Niki Sardot
City: Florence (Missoula County)

Mr. Hammond,

Please accept my comments on the Sharp Tailed Grouse.

The Mt.Gov FIELD GUIDE states that the Sharp Tailed Grouse has never existed in the State of Montana. The question I pose to all that read this is why the lies? The historical, the native...etc. I was the sole landowner two sessions ago at the Governors push through of the Sage Grouse Implementation Act. The then head o Dept. of Interior understood and stated that if she declared the Grouse endangered, it would destroy farmers and rancher property values across the U.S. Our Governor didn't care and went ahead. I understand its' impact (another Spotted Owl fiasco) on our State and property rights. Adjoining landowners will be hurt financially, told how to graze, how high their fences are, eggs will somehow be planted on their land making it impossible to grow, subdivide, build on...A TAKINGS...FWP will have the right to void huge swaths of native animals; fox, ravens, skunks, weasels, badgers, coyotes, bobcats, hawks, endangered eagles, turkey buzzards (endangered)...all for a bird not native, that can't survive in Western Montanas' open grasslands (no predator cover) or forest. In conclusion, this action is not a recovery, reintroduction or reclamation project but a NEW species being introduced, killing of native animals, with an emphasis on adjoining landowners participation by giving up historical grazing rights, being told to change out fences to lower height, "You are now in the designated Grouse nesting area and won't be able to build, hay, subdivide, use heavy equipment, graze cows, horses," by Missoula County Planning Dept. I believe this is a TEST SITE for Montana, and the rest of the U.S. is watching. The goal is to use whatever means to return wild. Yukon to Yucatan. My ranch backs up to the 21,000 Acre MPG Ranch. . . the 2nd choice area due to poor habitat.

I will never support this action for the above reasons.

This e-mail was generated from the 'Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment Open to Public Comment' Public Notice Web Page.

Hammond, Christopher

From: Kim.colville@tigomail.cr
Sent: Wednesday, March 6, 2019 7:40 AM
To: Hammond, Christopher
Subject: Public Comment: Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment Open to Public Comment

Categories: Public Comment

Name:

City:

Another land grab attempt.

This e-mail was generated from the 'Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment Open to Public Comment' Public Notice Web Page.

Debbie

Hammond, Christopher

From: Daneke, Dennis E <Dennis.Daneke@mso.umt.edu>
Sent: Monday, March 4, 2019 9:16 AM
To: Hammond, Christopher
Subject: s'tail grouse.

Categories: Public Comment

I support the reintroduction of sharptail grouse to western Montana

DDaneke

Hammond, Christopher

From: Chris <mermax_elkco@msn.com>
Sent: Monday, March 4, 2019 9:34 AM
To: Hammond, Christopher
Subject: Sharp Tailed Grouse

Categories: Public Comment

I support bringing Sharp Tailed Grouse back to Western Montana.
Thanks Chris O'Connor

Sent from my Verizon, Samsung Galaxy smartphone

Hammond, Christopher

From: greg shay <gregshay777@gmail.com>
Sent: Monday, March 4, 2019 9:15 AM
To: Hammond, Christopher
Subject: MT Support for Alternative 2

Categories: Public Comment

We support the repopulation of Sharptail Grouse in Western MT.

Thank you,

Greg Shay

Sent from [Mail](#) for Windows 10

Hammond, Christopher

From: Hannah Nikonow <h.nikonow@gmail.com>
Sent: Monday, March 4, 2019 8:52 AM
To: Hammond, Christopher
Cc: Greg Munther; Kevin Farron; Corey Ellis
Subject: Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Proposal, public comment letter of support
Attachments: Sharptail Grouse EA comments.doc

Categories: Public Comment

Hi Chris!

I hope you are doing very well. Attached is a letter of support for the sharp-tailed grouse reintroduction proposal as part of the public comment period ending on March 17th. This comment is from the Montana Chapter of Backcountry Hunters & Anglers.

Dave says hi, too, and we both warm wishes!

Cheers,
Hannah

Hannah Jean Nikonow
12 Orchard Court, Missoula, MT 59803
h.nikonow@gmail.com
(307) 431-9876

Hammond, Christopher

From: Stefen Harvey <stefenharvey@yahoo.com>
Sent: Sunday, March 3, 2019 8:15 AM
To: Hammond, Christopher
Subject: I support Alternative 2

Categories: Public Comment

Sharptails are as foundational to the image of Montana as Elk, Grizzlies and Wolves. I heartily support their reintroduction into Western Montana.

Best Regards,

Stefen Harvey

Sent from my iPad

Hammond, Christopher

From: Chris Nelson <wyrhair@gmail.com>
Sent: Friday, March 1, 2019 6:00 PM
To: Hammond, Christopher
Subject: Support

Categories: Public Comment

I support Alternative 2 Regards Chris E Nelson

Hammond, Christopher

From: Bernard Constantin <bernard.constantin06@gmail.com>
Sent: Friday, March 1, 2019 5:10 PM
To: Hammond, Christopher
Subject: Grouse recovery project

Categories: Public Comment

I support Alternative 2.

It is a great idea to reintroduce sharp tail grouse in Western Montana.

Hammond, Christopher

From: Albert Canaris <agcanaris@gmail.com>
Sent: Friday, March 1, 2019 3:35 PM
To: Hammond, Christopher
Subject: Sharp-tailed grouse introduction into Western Montana

Categories: Public Comment

Dear Sir,

I support the above. Please commence introduction as soon as possible-it's time!!

Best regards,

Albert G. Canaris
Prof Emeritus, Bio Sci
160 Shadow Mountain Rd
Hamilton, MT 59840

Hammond, Christopher

From: O'Connor Roy <rsoc2001@yahoo.com>
Sent: Friday, March 1, 2019 12:12 PM
To: Hammond, Christopher
Subject: Alternative 2

Categories: Public Comment

I strongly support alternative 2. As a long time land owner in the Blackfoot valley, the Heart bar Heart Ranch, I have worked closely with Mt FWP on stream restoration to promote cutthroat trout recovery, and am very excited to hear about the possibility of sharp tail grouse reintroduction. We would be on board to assist you in any way possible.
Roy O'Connor

Sent from my iPad

Hammond, Christopher

From: james brown <brownjs2@bresnan.net>
Sent: Friday, March 1, 2019 11:48 AM
To: Hammond, Christopher
Subject: sharp-tailed grouse

Categories: Public Comment

I recently learned of a proposed introduction of Sharptails to western Montana valleys. As a hunter and birder I fully support the introduction. Many years ago I remember seeing Sharp-tailed Grouse in several areas near Browns Lake by Ovando, but they have been gone from that area for many years now. Birders in particular would be thrilled to be able to see Sharptails again in that area. With much of the upper Blackfoot protected by conservation easements the extensive grassland and shrubland habitat should be a good bet for successful reintroduction. Please do it.

Jim Brown

1504 Woods Gulch Rd, Missoula MT

Hammond, Christopher

From: james cleveland <jcleveland31@gmail.com>
Sent: Friday, March 1, 2019 11:18 AM
To: Hammond, Christopher
Categories: Public Comment

I support alternative 2
Thank you,
James

Hammond, Christopher

From: dtribby@midrivers.com
Sent: Thursday, February 28, 2019 12:51 PM
To: Hammond, Christopher
Cc: Joe Perry; 161foraccess; Jlwmontana; jjjd2@icloud.com; Rswood msa treasurer; Jeff Herbert; Don Thomas; Steve and Annette Schindler
Subject: Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Introduction
Categories: Public Comment

Chris;

On behalf of the Montana Sportsmen Alliance, we support the proposed Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Introduction proposal. The Environmental Assessment (EA) adequately addresses our concerns of potential removal of too many "source birds" from existing leks. In addition, the potential release sites have been adequately analyzed for potential as long-term habitat, capable of supporting self-sustaining populations of sharp-tailed grouse.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment and all the very best.

Montana Sportsmen Alliance Leadership

John Borggreen, Great Falls

Steve Schindler, Glasgow

Jeff Herbert, Helena

Don Thomas, Lewistown

Sam Milodragovich, Butte

Joe Perry, Conrad

JW Westman, Park City

Dale Tribby, Miles City

Robert Wood, Hamilton

Hammond, Christopher

From: Menning.shawn@gmail.com <Menning.shawn@gmail.com>
Sent: Wednesday, February 27, 2019 8:49 PM
To: Hammond, Christopher
Subject: Public Comment: Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment Open to Public Comment

Categories: Public Comment

Name: Shawn Menning

City: Columbia Falls, MT

Love the idea of having Sharptail across all of there historic range!

This e-mail was generated from the 'Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment Open to Public Comment' Public Notice Web Page.

Hammond, Christopher

From: emlon_stanton <emlon_stanton@yahoo.com>
Sent: Wednesday, February 27, 2019 10:17 AM
To: Hammond, Christopher
Subject: Sharptail

Categories: Public Comment

This is an incredible bird and it would be a great benefit to have them back in Western Montana.

Sent via the Samsung Galaxy S7 active, an AT&T 4G LTE smartphone

Hammond, Christopher

From: drayna@nidcd.nih.gov
Sent: Wednesday, February 27, 2019 6:05 AM
To: Hammond, Christopher
Subject: Public Comment: Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment Open to Public Comment

Categories: Public Comment

Name: Dennis Drayna

City: Polebridge, MT

I strongly support efforts to re-establish sharp-tailed grouse west of the continental divide.

This e-mail was generated from the 'Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment Open to Public Comment' Public Notice Web Page.

Hammond, Christopher

From: wendellguthrie@gmail.com
Sent: Tuesday, February 26, 2019 11:38 AM
To: Hammond, Christopher
Subject: Public Comment: Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment Open to Public Comment

Categories: Public Comment

Name: wendell guthrie

City: missoula

I have watched the MPG group work on this plan. The work has been careful and thorough. I'm in favor.

This e-mail was generated from the 'Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment Open to Public Comment' Public Notice Web Page.

Hammond, Christopher

From: greg_neudecker@fws.gov <greg_neudecker@fws.gov>
Sent: Monday, February 25, 2019 12:04 PM
To: Hammond, Christopher
Subject: Public Comment: Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment Open to Public Comment

Categories: Public Comment

Name: Greg Neudecker

City: Ovando

As a resident of the Blackfoot Valley and a Biologist who has worked in the Blackfoot for 30 years I support the proposal to reintroduce Shaptailed grouse to the Blackfoot Valley. I work for the US Fish and Wildlife Service on our Private Lands Program called Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program. I and folks from my staff have worked with just about every landowner in the Blackfoot Valley on conservation projects including habitat restoration, protection and reintroduction of trumpeter swans to the Blackfoot Valley. I believe there would be strong support for this program and our program would be happy to help in any way we could. I can't speak for the other two potential sites as they are not within any of our MT Focus Areas and don't have a good feel for habitat or landowner interactions, but trust the MTFWP team in their analysis and expertise.

This e-mail was generated from the 'Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment Open to Public Comment' Public Notice Web Page.

Hammond, Christopher

From: The2hikers@yahoo.com
Sent: Saturday, February 23, 2019 7:49 PM
To: Hammond, Christopher
Subject: Public Comment: Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment Open to Public Comment

Categories: Public Comment

Name: Steve Houston

City: Stevensville

We should never miss an opportunity to reintroduce game birds in Montana, especially native species. I'm glad you are considering this undertaking and would volunteer to help.

This e-mail was generated from the 'Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment Open to Public Comment' Public Notice Web Page.

Hammond, Christopher

From: chrlnoland@yahoo.com
Sent: Saturday, February 23, 2019 4:53 PM
To: Hammond, Christopher
Subject: Public Comment: Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment Open to Public Comment

Categories: Public Comment

Name: Charlie Noland

City: Worden

I am a lifelong MT resident and an avid fan of the sporting qualities of the Sharptail Grouse.

I am in favor of option 2 (reintroduction of STG to the Blackfoot, Bitterroot, and Drummond areas). The 2018 farm bill will subsidize and encourage the conversion of rangeland in Eastern MT to cropland, thus further reducing habitat for STG. The UGBEP current strategic plan mentions possible reintroduction of STG to Western MT (p 23) . While I think the hunter opportunities would be minimal, the viewing of lekking behaviour would certainly be welcome by Western MT birders. Native Americans called the STG the "fire grouse" as they favored the early successional habitat following natural (and intentional) fires. Many tribes also patterned some of their dances after the lek behavior (dancing) of STG males. So, as the northern and eastern MT STG habitat continues to decline due to rangeland conversion, a self sustaining population(s) of STG in Western MT would certainly be welcome.

This e-mail was generated from the 'Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment Open to Public Comment' Public Notice Web Page.

Hammond, Christopher

From: dbaitken@blackfoot.net
Sent: Friday, February 22, 2019 8:17 PM
To: Hammond, Christopher
Subject: Public Comment: Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment Open to Public Comment

Categories: Public Comment

Name: Dona Aitken

City: Ovando

As a resident of the Blackfoot Valley I would like to urge you to proceed with the STGR reintroduction. We are very proud of and pleased by the success of the Trumpeter Swan reintroduction and would be optimistic for the success of this reintroduction as well that would complete the re-establishment of all the formerly native species of this area; - a laudable goal you have set for yourselves. I would expect that many local residents, including myself, would be willing monitors if you decided to include a 'citizen scientist' component to this project.

This e-mail was generated from the 'Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment Open to Public Comment' Public Notice Web Page.

Hammond, Christopher

From: agoseris@gmail.com
Sent: Wednesday, February 20, 2019 2:22 PM
To: Hammond, Christopher
Subject: Public Comment: Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment Open to Public Comment

Categories: Public Comment

Name: Rebecca Durham

City: Missoula

I support Alternative B: Reintroduce STGR to the Blackfoot Valley, Northern Bitterroot Valley, and Drummond Area. This alternative will help management gain a better understanding of habitat needs and ensure the long-term viability of reintroduced populations.

This e-mail was generated from the 'Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment Open to Public Comment' Public Notice Web Page.



PO Box 9173
Kalispell, MT 59904-9173
www.flatheadaudubon.org

February 20, 2019
Chris Hammond
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
490 North Meridian Road
Kalispell, MT 59901
Dear Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks,

Dear Mr. Hammond:

Flathead Audubon Society represents about 400 members from northwest Montana. Our mission is to conserve birds, wildlife habitat and ecosystem diversity; promote awareness and appreciation of the natural world through education and advocacy; work with diverse groups and agencies to achieve sound decisions on natural resource issues; provide community services such as school programs, work projects, and field trips.

We have reviewed the Draft Environmental Assessment for WESTERN MONTANA SHARP-TAILED GROUSE REINTRODUCTION. We heartily endorse the proposed action to re-establish self-supporting populations of sharp-tailed grouse west of the continental divide in Montana. We further support the selection of Alternative B that would utilize 3 sites in western Montana.

We realize that historical efforts to augment or re-establish sharp-tail populations have had limited success but the proposed action has a high probability of success due to the incorporation of a variety of actions based on the most recent available data on habitat, genetics, and translocation methods.

Thank you for the opportunity to support this proposal.

Sincerely,

Kay Mitchell, President
Flathead Audubon Society

Hammond, Christopher

From: fultzdd@battlers.ab.edu
Sent: Tuesday, February 19, 2019 1:13 PM
To: Hammond, Christopher
Subject: Public Comment: Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment Open to Public Comment

Categories: Public Comment

Name: Daniel Fultz

City: Alberton

I was unable to open the PDF attachments. That being said I am in overall support of establishing native species back to their historical range. I encourage FWP to do all that they can to once again establish sharptail grouse in western Montana. I would also encourage FWP to work with the Salish-Kootenai tribe to establish a population of sharptail grouse again in the Hot Springs and Mission Valleys.

This e-mail was generated from the 'Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment Open to Public Comment' Public Notice Web Page.

Hammond, Christopher

From: toddskibbe@hotmail.com
Sent: Tuesday, February 19, 2019 10:16 AM
To: Hammond, Christopher
Subject: Public Comment: Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment Open to Public Comment

Categories: Public Comment

Name: Todd Skibbe
City: Alberton, MT
Please reintroduce Sharptail Grouse to Western Montana!

This e-mail was generated from the 'Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment Open to Public Comment' Public Notice Web Page.

Hammond, Christopher

From: michaelshpard7@gmail.com
Sent: Saturday, February 16, 2019 10:24 AM
To: Hammond, Christopher
Subject: Public Comment: Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment Open to Public Comment

Categories: Public Comment

Name: Michael F Shepard

City: Columbia Falls

Only one comment...if this re-introduction occurs, is the FWP going to control all predators in the area? That area is known for its hawks, owls, coyotes etc, and these birds need protection.

This e-mail was generated from the 'Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction Draft Environmental Assessment Open to Public Comment' Public Notice Web Page.

February 28 2019

Chris Hammond
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
490 North Meridian Road
Kalispell, MT 59901

Re: Sharp-tailed Reintroduction Environmental Assessment

To: Chris Hammond

The Montana Chapter of Backcountry Hunters and Anglers (MTBHA) is writing to express its support of the reintroduction of sharptailed grouse (STGR) to western Montana.

The reintroduction of STGR would replace a missing part of the western Montana landscape. Whether or not there would be eventual hunting opportunities for STGR, our members and most hunters would be happy to know that these native birds are on the landscape that they spend their most cherished time on. The opportunity to see a STGR while stalking a deer, calling to an elk or searching for sheds would add immensely to the experience and recreation value of western Montana.

MTBHA does recommend that once reintroduction efforts have commenced that FWP make efforts to make hunters aware of the bird's presence, to avoid accidental take of STGR. This will not only protect STGR and the effort to reintroduce them but avoid potential legal and ethical problems for hunters who are not used to the presence of STGR in their favorite hunting areas. FWP should also avoid a rush to create a hunting season for STGR until there is certainty that reestablished populations can withstand hunting.

Although there appears to be little risk of jeopardizing existing populations with capture of STGR in central and eastern Montana, MTBHA recommends that efforts be made by FWP to monitor those populations, so that one existing population is not sacrificed inadvertently for the sake of another.

MTBHA applauds FWP and its partners in their proactive management and its efforts to restore a small, but invaluable piece of Montana's wild landscape.

Thank you for your time and consideration of our comments,

Montana Chapter of Backcountry Hunters and Anglers



406-396-1790

blarkin@mpgranch.com

19400 Lower Woodchuck Road
Florence, MT
59833

February 26, 2019

Chris Hammond
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
490 North Meridian Road
Kalispell, MT 59901

Good day,

I'm Beau Larkin, Forest Ecologist and Property Manager at MPG Ranch in Florence, MT. At the direction of both my supervisor and the owner of MPG, I've been a core member of the Sharp-tailed Grouse working group since 2012. We strongly support reintroductions at all three sites identified in the draft Environmental Assessment: Blackfoot, Drummond, and Bitterroot. This is Alternative B in the draft Environmental Assessment.

From the beginning, we've been a solid partner in this effort. We contributed to the habitat assessment (in peer review now) by doing GIS analysis, training field staff, and organizing field data to learn about conditions on the ground in the potential reintroduction areas. We've contributed funding to various research efforts that include genetics work on known grouse populations, and we also provided funding to a scientist from Montana State University, Lance McNew, to bring his students to the reintroduction sites. Lance later authored a population viability analysis in support of the project.

While working directly on the reintroduction proposal, we have also continued to restore the grasslands at MPG. They were degraded by a century of over-grazing, and we've made great progress towards repairing them. We've reduced the exotic forage grass plantations to a shadow of their former acreage, and in their place, native grasses and forbs are starting to flourish. Riparian areas once damaged by cattle now show strong recruitment of aspen and cottonwood saplings. Our investment in restoration will continue long into the future.

Right now, we are educating our neighbors so that they know what to expect if and when birds are released. Working with landowners is important for this project to succeed because the birds may choose to fly from the release site and

establish leks on a neighbor's property. In that case, biologists will want access to monitor birds. Our neighbors will be prepared for this well in advance so that there aren't any unwanted surprises, and I hope that you receive comments from one or more of our neighbors.

If this project is allowed to proceed, we will continue to contribute whatever MT FWP needs to make sure it is successful. This includes funding, assistance with field monitoring, willing collaboration with research, continued attention to relationships with neighbors and partners, and outreach about the project.

Most importantly, I want to thank the many people at MT FWP that have participated in the project and allowed our workgroup to develop the project to this point. It's an honor to be able to participate in this state-led effort, and I think that the inclusive nature of our workgroup and the project in general is a testament to your agency's commitment to the security of native wildlife species in Montana.

Regards,



Beau Larkin



March 13, 2019

Chris Hammond

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

490 North Meridian Road

Kalispell, MT 59901

Dear Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks,

Dear Mr. Hammond:

Bitterroot Audubon Society represents about 200 members in the Bitterroot and Missoula Valleys of western Montana. We support Audubon's mission to conserve and restore natural ecosystems, focusing on birds, other wildlife, and their habitats for the benefit of humanity and earth's biological diversity. We accomplish this mission by:

- Offering educational programs and field trips for Chapter members and the general public.
- Advocating political and personal actions that promote the conservation of wildlife and their habitats.
- Cooperating with the National Audubon Society and Montana Audubon on national and state-wide endeavors, as well as local conservation-oriented projects.

We believe that efforts towards the reintroduction of sharp-tailed grouse fit in well with our stated mission. We have reviewed the Draft Environmental Assessment for WESTERN MONTANA SHARP-TAILED GROUSE REINTRODUCTION. We heartily endorse the proposed action to re-establish self-supporting populations of sharp-tailed grouse west of the continental divide in Montana. We further support the selection of Alternative B that would utilize three sites in western Montana, including the Bitterroot Valley. We pledge to work with agencies, private landowners, and other conservation groups to make reintroduction in the Bitterroot Valley a success.

We realize that historical efforts to augment or re-establish sharp-tail populations have had limited success, but believe the current efforts go a long way to ensure success due to the incorporation of a variety of actions based on the most recent available data on habitat, genetics, and translocation methods.

Thank you for all of your work on this effort, and the opportunity to support this exciting proposal.

Sincerely,

Becky Peters, President
Bitterroot Audubon Society

Draft Environmental Assessment

WESTERN MONTANA SHARP-TAILED GROUSE REINTRODUCTION

February 2019

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Chapter 1.0: Purpose and Need for Action

1.1 Background

Although STGR are classified as an upland game bird in Montana, there has been no hunting season in the western part of the state since 1948. Since 1984 restoration and conservation of STGR in western Montana has remained an FWP priority. Populations west of the Continental Divide were believed to be extirpated by the mid-2000s. FWP and partners interested in restoring STGR to western Montana completed an assessment of habitat quality in 2015. They found large areas of habitat in the Blackfoot, Clark Fork, and Bitterroot valleys equivalent to that available within the bird's range in north central Montana. If past habitat changes caused the original declines then the conditions have recovered sufficiently to now support populations. If other factors caused past declines, then monitoring of transplanted birds is the only way to identify current limiting factors.

Anderson et al. (2018) found habitat quality in the proposed reintroduction areas was comparable to some of the best habitat containing healthy STGR populations in FWP Region 4. For nesting habitat suitability, the Blackfoot Valley scored higher than the occupied sites, while the northern Bitterroot Valley scored as high or higher. The Drummond area scored the lowest for nesting habitat suitability, but was within range of variation of the occupied sites. For brood-rearing habitat suitability the Blackfoot Valley and the Drummond area scored high. The northern Bitterroot Valley scored the lowest of the three proposed reintroduction sites. Based on small sample sizes for winter habitat suitability, the Blackfoot Valley scored higher than two of occupied sites in Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) Region 4. The northern Bitterroot Valley and the Drummond area were within the range of variation of the remaining two occupied sites for winter habitat suitability. Milligan et al. (2018) modeled population viability based on average survival and reproductive rates for STGR in the published literature. Their assessment indicated that long-range population viability was questionable without additional management actions to improve survival and reproductive rates. They also suggested that site specific information from translocated birds could be used to help inform decision on the need for additional actions. If any such actions are warranted, FWP would considering pursuing those actions subject to addition environmental review.

1.2 Proposed Action

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks proposes to re-establish self-sustaining sharp-tailed grouse (STGR) populations west of the Continental Divide by reintroductions of grouse in 1-3 core areas identified to have the most suitable habitat; the Blackfoot Valley, the northern Bitterroot Valley, and/or the Drummond Area. FWP would capture approximately 75-180 STGR each year

for 5 years across Regions 4, 5, 6, and 7. Capture locations would be dispersed in a way as to minimize impact to source populations. FWP will also monitor survival and reproductive rates of the translocated STGR.

1.3 Need for Action

STGR are a priority for FWP's Wildlife Mitigation Program which was established to mitigate for the losses of wildlife habitat and populations caused by Libby Dam. FWP's SWAP identified the current state of STGR west of the continental divide as "isolated and extremely small," but in reality, they are now likely extinct. Two conservation actions identified in the SWAP Plan are to 1) "evaluate potential for STGR reintroduction" and 2) "increase abundance and distribution of STGR with a reintroduction program to western Montana." Specific direction is also provided in the 1984 Mitigation Plan for Libby Dam (Mundinger and Yde 1984), the 1987 Northwest Power and Conservation Council Fish and Wildlife Program (Northwest Power and Planning Council 1987), the 1991 Columbian STGR Mitigation Implementation Plan for Western Montana (Wood 1991), and most recently the 2016 Wildlife Mitigation Operating Plan (Wood 2016), which prioritizes project funding for five areas including grasslands/STGR. STGR are the only bird species historically occurring in western Montana now absent from the region. With a genetic analysis completed in 2009 (Warheit and Dean 2009), a habitat assessment completed in 2015 (Anderson et al. in review), and a restoration plan completed in 2017 (McNew et al. 2017), FWP now must decide whether to proceed with STGR restoration in western Montana.

1.4 Objectives of the Action (desired outcomes and conditions)

Restore and maintain 1-3 populations of STGR in western Montana that have a 95% probability of persistence for 50 years.

1.5 Relevant Plans, EISs, EAs, Regulations, Authorities

- Wildlife and Wildlife Habitat Mitigation Plan-Libby Dam (Mundinger and Yde 1984)
- Council Fish & Wildlife Program (Northwest Power Planning Council 1987)
- Bonneville Power Administration Wildlife Settlement (1988)
- Columbian STGR Mitigation Implementation Plan for Western Montana (Wood 1991)
- Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program Strategic Plan (FWP 2011)
- Montana State Wildlife Action Plan (FWP 2015)
- Program for Mitigating Wildlife Impacts Resulting from Construction and Inundation caused by Libby and Hungry Horse Dam-Six Year Operating Plan (Wood 2016)
- Restoration Plan for STGR Recovery in Western Montana (McNew et al. 2017)

1.5 Decision That Must Be Made

The decision to be made is whether FWP should proceed with the reintroduction of STGR west of the Continental Divide in core areas identified to have the most suitable habitat. This EA analyzes the environmental consequences associated with implementing the 5 alternatives and will determine whether any alternative action would result in an effect significant enough to trigger the need for an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). If an EIS is not required, a Decision Notice will document the decision and rationale.

1.6 Applicable Permits, Licenses, and other Consultation Requirements

- FWP Scientific Collectors Permit
- Approval of animal capture, handling, and care protocols will be acquired from an approved Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC)
- Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Letter of Authorization to use BLM land for capture
- Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) Letter of Authorization to use state school trust land for capture

Chapter 2.0: Alternatives Including the Proposed Action

2.1 Introduction

STGR are a species where males gather at specific locations known as leks to compete for breeding with visiting females. FWP would use leks in FWP Regions 4, 5, 6, and 7 as sources to establish up to three populations of STGR in western Montana. Reintroduction areas were identified based on a habitat assessment completed in 2015. Capture and reintroduction efforts could begin as early as fall 2019 and would continue for up to 5 years within a 10-year period following the initial release. The time frame will depend on the success of the reintroduction(s) and/or accessibility to source populations. Intensive monitoring would begin in the first year and continue for at least 5 years with long-term monitoring continuing afterwards.

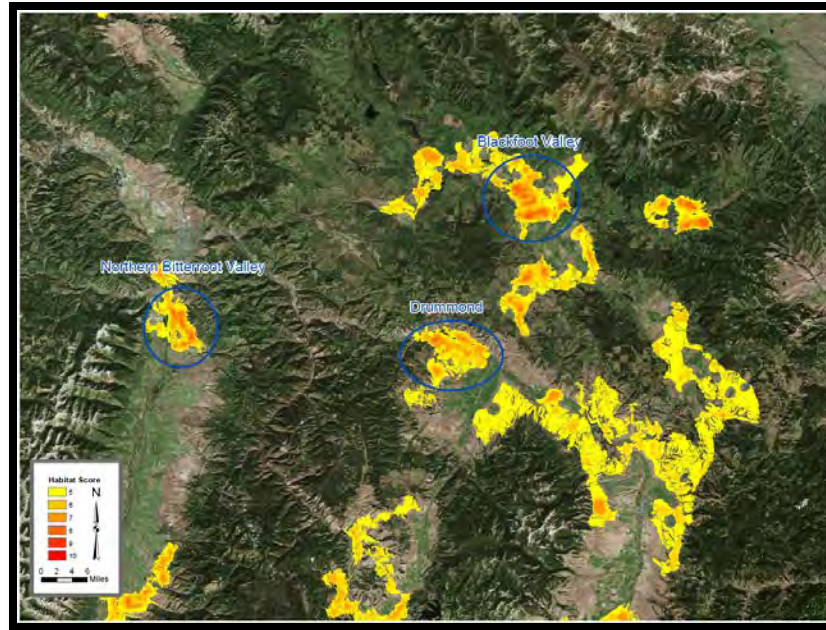


Figure 1. Map of proposed reintroduction areas identified by 2015 habitat assessment.

2.2 Process Used to Develop the Alternatives

2.2.1 History and Development Process of the Alternatives

Management of STGR have remained an FWP priority for 34 years dating back to the Libby Mitigation Plan (Mundinger and Yde 1984) which quantified habitat and wildlife losses after the creation of Kootenai Reservoir. Attempts to augment a population of STGR in the Tobacco Plains of northwest Montana with Columbian STGR were unsuccessful in the early and mid-1990s (Young and Wood 2012). A genetic analysis in 2009 determined that all STGR populations sampled from western Montana were of the plains subspecies (Figure 2-Warheit and Dean 2009). FWP and a number of other partners recently completed an evaluation of potential STGR habitat in western Montana (Anderson et. al. in review). The objective was to compare habitat variables important to STGR population survival 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 indicated that suitable habitat existed west of the Divide for the reintroduction of STGR (Figure 3). A restoration plan (McNew et. al. 2017) examined feasibility of the project with a population viability analysis (PVA) that incorporated detailed management scenarios. Two scenarios generated 95% probability of minimum viable populations persisting for at least 50 years.

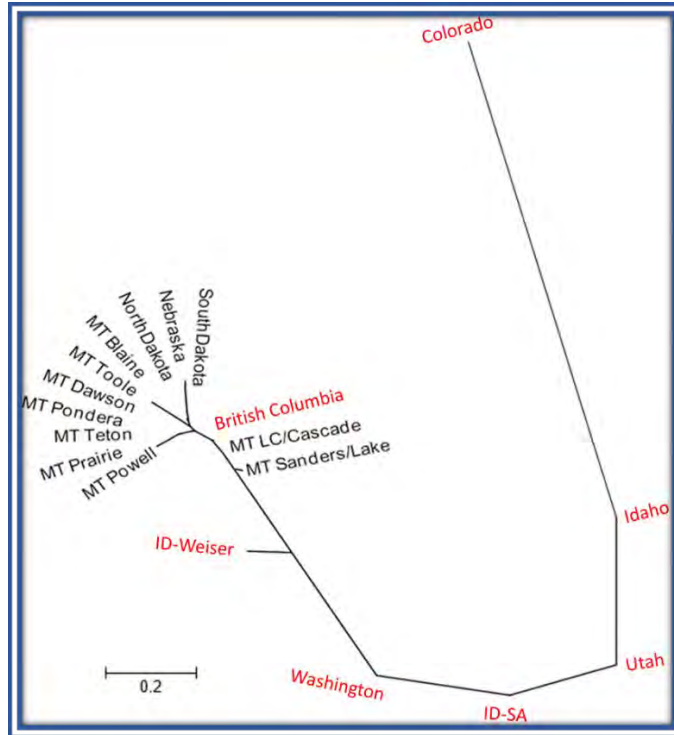


Figure 2. Genetic distance using unrooted neighbor-joining tree where longer lines represent greater genetic distance (from Warheit and Dean 2009). Montana populations begin with the abbreviation MT. Populations in black are plains STGR and populations in red are Columbian STGR.

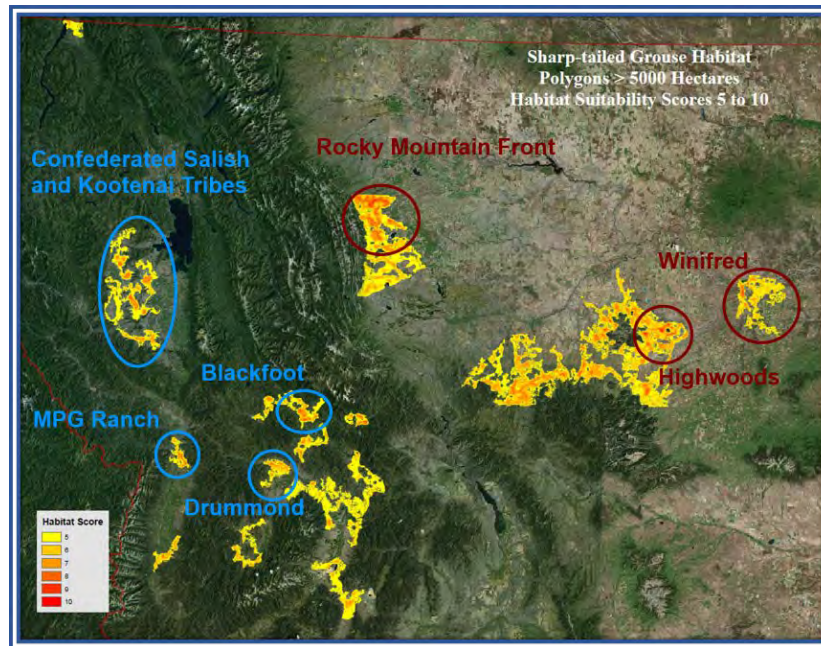


Figure 3. Study sites with habitat suitability scores > 5 and > 5,000 ha. Blue indicates unoccupied while red indicates occupied sites.

2.2.2 Alternatives Eliminated from Detailed Study

Although the Tobacco Plains Area (Figure 4) had population augmentation in the past (Wood 1991, Young and Wood 2012), the area no longer had habitat to sustain a minimum viable population and was eliminated as an alternative. The Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes have collaborated on the project from the beginning as STGR are of cultural significance to the tribes. However, the Flathead Indian Reservation had the lowest habitat suitability of all western Montana sites suggesting those sites were not currently adequate to support reintroduction and so were removed as an alternative (Figure 4).

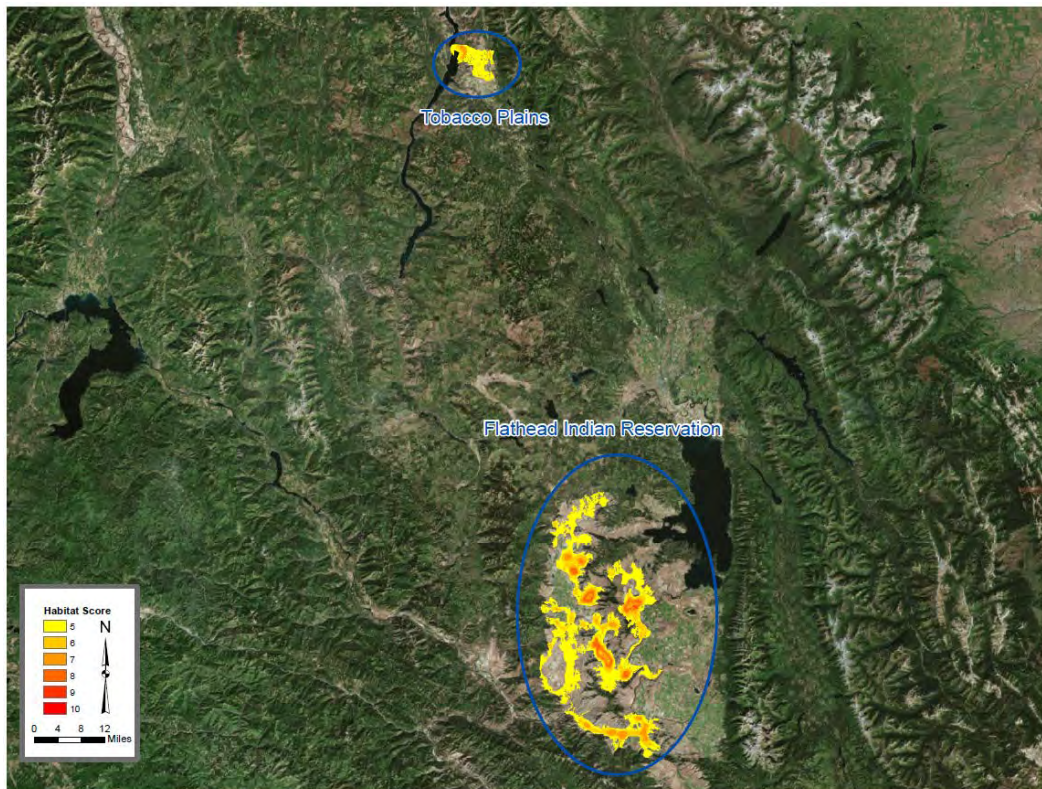


Figure 4. Map of alternative areas eliminated from detailed study.

2.3 Description of Alternatives

The EA evaluates 5 alternatives. These include Alternative A, the *No Action Alternative* (Section 2.3.1); Alternative B, *Reintroduce STGR to the Blackfoot Valley, Northern Bitterroot Valley, and the Drummond Area* (Section 2.3.2); Alternative C, *Reintroduce STGR to the Blackfoot Valley and the Northern Bitterroot Valley* (Section 2.3.3); Alternative D, *Reintroduce STGR to the Blackfoot Valley and the Drummond Area* (Section 2.3.4); and Alternative E, *Reintroduce STGR to the Blackfoot Valley* (Section 2.3.5).

2.3.1 Alternative A: No Action Alternative

No STGR would be captured from leks east of the Continental Divide and reintroduced into areas west of the Continental Divide. The environmental impacts and benefits as described in this EA (see Chapter 3) would not occur.

2.3.2 Alternative B: Reintroduce STGR to the Blackfoot Valley, Northern Bitterroot Valley, and Drummond Area

Alternative B would provide approximately 75-180 STGR per year for up to 5 years from sources in FWP Regions 4, 5, 6, and 7. Reintroduction would occur in the Blackfoot Valley, Northern Bitterroot Valley, and Drummond Area.

2.3.3 Alternative C: Reintroduce STGR to the Blackfoot Valley and the Northern Bitterroot Valley

Alternative C would provide 50-180 total STGR per year for up to 5 years from sources in FWP Regions 4, 5, 6, and 7. Reintroduction would occur in the Blackfoot Valley and Northern Bitterroot Valley.

2.3.4 Alternative D: Reintroduce STGR to the Blackfoot Valley and the Drummond Area

Alternative D would provide 50-180 total STGR per year for up to 5 years from sources in FWP Regions 4, 5, 6, and 7. Reintroduction would occur in the Blackfoot Valley and Drummond Area.

2.3.5 Alternative E: Reintroduce STGR to the Blackfoot Valley

Alternative E would provide 25-180 total STGR per year for up to five years from sources in FWP Regions 4, 5, 6, and 7. Reintroduction would occur only in the Blackfoot Valley.

Chapter 3.0: Affected Environment & Predicted Environmental Consequences

3.1 Introduction

Section 3 describes the physical, biological, and human resources that may be affected by the alternatives presented and their environmental effects on those resources. Affected environment and environmental consequences have been combined into one chapter.

3.2 Description of Relevant Pre-Existing Factors

3.2.1 Pre-Existing Factors in the Blackfoot Valley (from STGR Restoration Plan)

The Blackfoot Valley is one of the last known areas to support a population of STGR in western Montana. There have been no formal population surveys or searches since 2000, but three reliable but unverified observations of STGR have been reported by landowners and agency personnel since that time (A. Wood, FWP, personal communication). Past research examining STGR populations suggest that the Blackfoot Valley should be a primary focus in STGR recovery west of the Continental Divide (Deeble 1996, Fitzpatrick 2003). Further, of the potential restoration sites, the Blackfoot Valley has the most complete data on past STGR habitat use, lek counts and lek locations (Deeble 2000).

The 45,838-acre Blackfoot Valley restoration site is located within the upper Blackfoot River Watershed, near Ovando and Helmsville. The majority of the reintroduction site is within Powell County, with a small portion occurring in Missoula County. The elevation ranges from a minimum of 3,996 ft to a maximum of 4,784 ft with a mean elevation of 4,219 ft. Average annual precipitation is 15.3 inches with a mean annual temperature of 40.5 °F and annual mean minimum and maximum temperatures of 26.2 °F and 54.9 °F, respectively (PRISM Climate Group 2016).

The vegetation in the Blackfoot reintroduction site is dominated by a shrub-steppe plant community with an estimated mean annual production of 1,067 lbs per acre that can range from 670 to 1,239 lbs per acre depending on the year (Natural Resources Conservation Service Soil Survey Staff 2016c). The vegetation consists primarily of mountain big sagebrush, Idaho fescue, rough fescue, bluebunch wheatgrass, arrowleaf balsamroot, western yarrow, and yellow salsify. Douglas fir, ponderosa pine, and Rocky Mountain juniper have invaded some areas likely due to fire suppression in the valley (Deeble 1996).

The Blackfoot Valley is transected by the north fork and main fork of the Blackfoot River as well as several streams, lakes, and wetlands. Approximately 15% of the vegetation in the upper Blackfoot Valley is comprised of riparian species (Fitzpatrick 2003). Riparian vegetation communities are generally comprised of black cottonwood, quaking aspen, birch, hawthorn, rose, snowberry, and willow.

The Blackfoot Valley reintroduction site is predominantly private land used for grazing cow/calf operations (36,582 acres). Large areas in the upper Blackfoot Valley have been converted to croplands, hay lands, exotic grass pastures, and grazed rangelands (Deeble 1996). Lands in the upper Blackfoot Valley are not a priority for CRP enrollment (Deeble 1996, M. Merrill, Farm Service Agency, personal communication). Public lands consist of state trust lands, FWP, Bureau of Land Management (BLM), U. S. Forest Service (USFS), and U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) lands (9,257 acres). The USFWS owned lands are managed as wildlife habitat, primarily for waterfowl production.

The Blackfoot Valley is home to a community-based conservation group, the Blackfoot Challenge, which has been identified as a national model for successful grassroots community conservation (Burnett 2013). The Blackfoot Challenge focuses on keeping working lands intact and preventing development and has helped to place over 90,000 acres in conservation easements. Conservation easements in the Blackfoot reintroduction site are managed primarily by the USFWS and the Montana Land Reliance, and account for 22,017 acres of private land in the Blackfoot reintroduction area. Conservation easements managed by USFWS restrict development but do not have grazing restrictions (K. Ertl, USFWS, personal communication).

Potential predators of STGR in the Blackfoot Valley include several carnivorous mammals including coyote, red fox, bobcat, mountain lion, raccoon, striped skunk, western spotted skunk, and several members of the weasel family, such as badger. Avian predators include falcons, hawks, owls, crows, ravens, and magpies.

3.2.2 Pre-Existing Factors in the Northern Bitterroot Valley

STGR were once common in the valleys of western Montana, including the Bitterroot Valley (Marks et al. 2016). The habitat suitability index model created by FWP concluded that this region has suitable habitat for STGR reintroduction (Anderson et al. 2018, in review).

The 21,273-acre Bitterroot Valley reintroduction site is located within the Bitterroot River Watershed near Florence and Lolo. Most of the reintroduction site is in Missoula County, with the southern portion entering Ravalli County. The elevation ranges from a minimum of 3,199 ft to a maximum of 5,400 ft, with an average of 3,622 ft. Average annual precipitation is 15.8 inches with a mean annual temperature of 44.6°F. The annual mean minimum and maximum temperatures are 31.1°F and 57.6°F, respectively (PRISM Climate Group 2016).

The vegetation at the site is dominated by introduced tame forage grass species and small remnant areas of native grass/shrub communities. Additionally, noxious weeds such as Dalmatian toadflax and spotted knapweed are present throughout the Bitterroot Valley. Mean annual production is 1,067 lbs per acre, with a minimum of 753 lbs per acre and maximum of 1,239 lbs per acre depending on the year (Natural Resources Conservation Service Soil Survey Staff 2016b). A field tour of the potential restoration site noted vegetation communities primarily consisting of crested wheatgrass, intermediate wheatgrass, cheatgrass, bluebunch wheatgrass, arrowleaf balsamroot, lupine, spotted knapweed, and wheat. Douglas fir, ponderosa pine, Rocky Mountain juniper, mountain mahogany, serviceberry, and chokecherry were also present, but were generally limited to small riparian draws and mid-mountain elevations. Large areas in the Bitterroot Valley have been converted to croplands, hay lands, exotic grass pastures, and grazed rangelands.

The Bitterroot Valley is transected by several streams and wetlands which drain into the Bitterroot River. Riparian vegetation communities are generally comprised of black cottonwood, quaking aspen, birch, hawthorn, rose, snowberry, and willow.

Potential predators of STGR in the Bitterroot Valley include several carnivorous mammals including coyote, red fox, bobcat, mountain lion, raccoon, striped skunk, western spotted skunk. Several members of the weasel family are also present, such as badger. Avian predators include falcons, hawks, owls, crows, ravens, and magpies.

The Bitterroot Valley site is dominated by private land (19,403 acres). The remaining 1,871 acres are public lands including state trust lands, FWP, county government, and Montana Department of Transportation (MDT). Conservation easements, that restrict future development, exist on 3,351 acres of private lands. The Bitterroot Valley has a mixture of working landscapes for agriculture, primarily cattle production, conservation for wildlife, and housing and industry development. Approximately 10,000 acres are managed for wildlife conservation at the MPG Ranch.

3.2.3 Pre-Existing Factors in the Drummond Area (from STGR Restoration Plan)

STGR were once common in the valleys of western Montana, however prior to 2000 populations disappeared (Marks et al. 2016). The Drummond reintroduction site is located in the Flint Creek Valley along the Clark Fork River Watershed, in Granite County. The habitat suitability index model concluded that this site has potential habitat

for STGR reintroduction (Anderson et al. 2018 in review).

The Drummond site and surrounding habitat encompasses 51,141 acres that are predominantly a working agriculture landscape focused on beef production. The elevation ranges from 3,747 ft to 5,600 ft with a mean elevation of 4,462 ft. Average annual precipitation is 14.3 inches with a mean annual temperature of 41.7°F and annual mean minimum and maximum temperatures of 28.2°F and 55.2°F, respectively (PRISM Climate Group 2016).

The vegetation in the Drummond reintroduction site is dominated by a shrub-steppe plant community with a mean annual production of 1,234 lbs per acre that can range from 805 to 1,576 lbs per acre depending on the year (Natural Resources Conservation Service Soil Survey Staff 2016a). The vegetation consists primarily of big sagebrush, Idaho fescue, and bluebunch wheatgrass. However, large areas in the Flint Creek Valley have been converted to croplands, hay lands, exotic grass pastures, and grazed rangelands. The Flint Creek Valley is transected by Flint Creek and several other streams and wetlands which drain into the Clark Fork River. Riparian vegetation communities are generally comprised of black cottonwood, quaking aspen, birch, hawthorn, rose, snowberry, and willow.

The Drummond site is primarily comprised of private lands (26,870 acres). Public lands account for 1,586 acres and are managed by Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC), MDT, and the BLM. Private land conservation easements compose 2,446 acres, all of which are managed by the Five Valleys Land Trust and are focused on maintaining wildlife habitat on working farms and ranches.

Potential predators of STGR at the Drummond site include several carnivorous mammals including coyote, red fox, bobcat, raccoon, striped skunk, and western spotted skunk, and several members of the weasel family including badger. Avian predators include falcons, hawks, owls, crows, ravens, and magpies.

3.3 Relevant Resource #1- STGR Population Effects on Source Populations (from STGR Restoration Plan)

STGR are a lekking species where males gather at specific locations to compete for breeding with visiting females. At each lek, only a few dominant males do all the breeding annually, so each year the majority of males are surplus. There are currently 241 mapped STGR leks with at least 15 males from lek survey data across Montana (Figure 5). This data represents a minimum

estimate of STGR leks on the landscape. There are other leks that meet this criterion, but they are not included in this dataset. Only leks with at least 15 males will be considered as sources for reintroduction efforts as these leks are large enough to avoid deleterious effects of removals from the population and geographically diverse enough to provide genetic diversity and similar habitat structures to each of the proposed reintroduction sites.

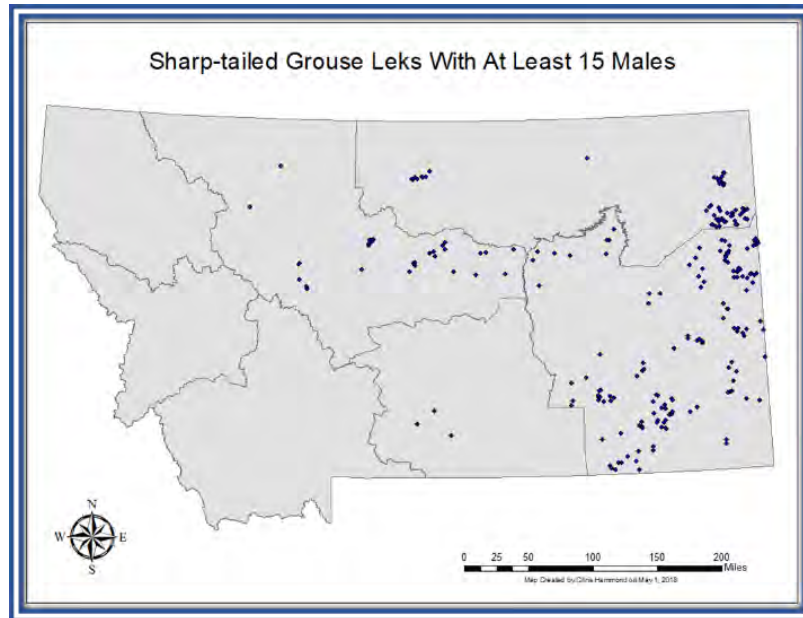


Figure 5. Currently mapped STGR leks in Montana that meet requirements for source populations.

3.3.1 Effects of Alternative A: No Action

- Direct Effects: Short-term reduction in the STGR population immediately surrounding the source leks would not occur. No potential population reductions due to the removal of STGR hens and their subsequent broods will occur.
- Indirect Effects: Disturbance on STGR leks would not occur. There will be no effect on the nesting success of hens being bred on those leks.

3.3.2 Effects of Alternative B: Reintroduction of STGR to the Blackfoot Valley, Northern Bitterroot Valley, and Drummond Area

- Direct Effects: During the initial fall of the restoration effort, FWP would remove 75 male STGR (providing 25 birds for each relocation site to establish leks the following spring) from leks with ≥ 15 males. No more than 30% of resident males will be removed

from any one lek. During each of the subsequent 4 springs, assuming favorable weather conditions, FWP would remove up to 180 STGR while maintaining a ratio of one male for every two females at each relocation site. We would prefer to move yearlings when possible and no more than 8 females will be removed from any one lek with ≥ 15 males. Capture efforts for females will focus on the 8 days after female lek attendance begins to maximize nesting at the relocation site.

- Indirect Effects: Increased disturbance on source leks will likely increase stress on non-captured hens and may reduce breeding success and subsequent nesting success of those hens. However, these effects are expected to be minimal and have no population level effects since we would only be capturing birds at a small fraction of all leks in central and eastern Montana.

3.3.3 Effects of Alternative C: Reintroduction of STGR to the Blackfoot Valley and the Northern Bitterroot Valley

- The initial fall of the restoration effort FWP would remove 50 male STGR (providing 25 birds for each relocation site to establish leks the following spring) from leks with ≥ 15 males. No more than 30% of resident males will be removed from any one lek. During each of the subsequent 4 springs, assuming favorable weather conditions, FWP would remove up to 180 STGR while maintaining a ratio of one male for every two females at each relocation site. We would prefer to move yearlings when possible and no more than 8 females will be removed from any one lek with ≥ 15 males. Capture efforts for females will focus on the 8 days after female lek attendance begins to maximize nesting at the relocation site.
- Indirect Effects: Increased disturbance on source leks will likely increase stress on non-captured hens and may reduce breeding success and subsequent nesting success of those hens. However, these effects are expected to be minimal and have no population level effects since we would only be capturing birds at a small fraction of all leks in central and eastern Montana.

3.3.4 Effects of Alternative D: Reintroduce STGR to the Blackfoot Valley and the Drummond Area

- The initial fall of the restoration effort FWP would remove 50 male STGR (providing 25 birds for each relocation site to establish leks the following spring) from leks with ≥ 15 males. No more than 30% of resident males will be removed from any one lek. During

each of the subsequent 4 springs, assuming favorable weather conditions, FWP would remove up to 180 STGR while maintaining a ratio of one male for every two females at each relocation site. We would prefer to move yearlings when possible and no more than 8 females will be removed from any one lek with ≥ 15 males. Capture efforts for females will focus on the 8 days after female lek attendance begins to maximize nesting at the relocation site.

- Indirect Effects: Increased disturbance on source leks will likely increase stress on non-captured hens and may reduce breeding success and subsequent nesting success of those hens. However, these effects are expected to be minimal and have no population level effects since we would only be capturing birds at a small fraction of all leks in central and eastern Montana.

3.3.5 Effects of Alternative E: Reintroduction of STGR to the Blackfoot Valley

- The initial fall of the restoration effort FWP would remove 25 male STGR from leks with ≥ 15 males so the birds can establish leks the following spring. No more than 30% of resident males will be removed from any one lek. During each of the subsequent 4 springs, assuming favorable weather conditions, FWP would remove up to 180 STGR while maintaining a ratio of one male for every two females. We would prefer to move yearlings when possible and no more than 8 females will be removed from any one lek with ≥ 15 males. Capture efforts for females will focus on the 8 days after female lek attendance begins to maximize nesting at the relocation site.
- Indirect Effects: Increased disturbance on source leks will likely increase stress on non-captured hens and may reduce breeding success and subsequent nesting success of those hens. However, these effects are expected to be minimal and have no population level effects since we would only be capturing birds at a small fraction of all leks in central and eastern Montana.

3.4 Relevant Resource #2- STGR Population Effects in Relocation Habitat

The STGR Restoration Plan (McNew et al. 2017) evaluated 10 different STGR restoration scenarios with a population viability analysis (PVA) focusing on specific management actions. Only two scenarios achieved the objective of this EA of a 95% probability of a STGR population persisting for at least 50 years. The first scenario included habitat management that improved nesting and wintering habitat by improving grazing practices and increasing shrub cover. Model results indicated that even at the smallest possible habitat area and minimum population size,

where the carry capacity was only 280 birds, the population increased by 23% per year. The second scenario included the habitat management component previously mentioned and a genetic rescue component that adds 10 STGR to the population every 10 year. This scenario takes into account the potential genetic diversity lost over time.

3.4.1 Effects of Alternative A: No Reintroduction

- Direct Effects: No reintroduction in western Montana would likely mean the species will remain extirpated.
- Indirect Effects: There would be no change in the population. No knowledge would be gained regarding the decline and extinction of STGR in western Montana.

3.4.2 Effects of Alternative B: Reintroduction of STGR to the Blackfoot Valley, Northern Bitterroot Valley, and Drummond Area

- Direct Effects: Successful reintroduction would result in new self-sustaining populations of STGR in the Blackfoot Valley, northern Bitterroot Valley, and the Drummond area. Population sizes will be limited by the amount of habitat available in each reintroduction area: estimates for Blackfoot Valley = 928 birds, northern Bitterroot Valley = 430 birds, and the Drummond area = 1035 birds. Information could be obtained about STGR ecology in western Montana and factors most influencing reintroduction success.
- Indirect Effects: With a Blackfoot Valley reintroduction, there is potential for population expansion south into the Helmville area. Such expansion would allow for at least an additional 600 birds. There is potential for connectivity between the Blackfoot and the Drummond population which would increase viability.

3.4.3 Effects of Alternative C: Reintroduction of STGR to the Blackfoot Valley and the Northern Bitterroot Valley

- Direct Effects: Successful reintroduction would result in new self-sustaining populations of STGR in the Blackfoot Valley and northern Bitterroot Valley. Population sizes will be limited by the amount of habitat available in each reintroduction area: estimates for Blackfoot Valley = 928 birds and the northern Bitterroot Valley = 430 birds. Some information could be obtained about STGR ecology in western Montana and factors most influencing reintroduction success.

- Indirect Effects: With a Blackfoot Valley reintroduction, there is potential for population expansion south into the Helmville area. Such expansion would allow for at least an additional 600 birds.

3.4.4 Effects of Alternative D: Reintroduce STGR to the Blackfoot Valley and the Drummond Area

- Direct Effects: Successful reintroduction would result in new self-sustaining populations of STGR in the Blackfoot Valley and the Drummond area. Population sizes will be limited by the amount of habitat available in each reintroduction area: estimates for Blackfoot Valley = 928 birds and the Drummond area = 1035 birds. Some information could be obtained about STGR ecology in western Montana and factors most influencing reintroduction success.
- Indirect Effects: With a Blackfoot Valley reintroduction, there is potential for population expansion south into the Helmville area. Such expansion would allow for at least an additional 600 birds. There is potential for connectivity between the Blackfoot and the Drummond population which would increase viability.

3.4.5 Effects of Alternative E: Reintroduction of STGR to the Blackfoot Valley

- Direct Effects: Successful reintroduction would result in new self-sustaining populations of STGR in the Blackfoot Valley. Population sizes will be limited by the amount of habitat available. The estimate for the Blackfoot Valley = 928 birds.
- Indirect Effects: With a Blackfoot Valley reintroduction, there is potential for population expansion south into the Helmville area. Such expansion would allow for at least an additional 600 birds.

3.5 Relevant Resources # 5- STGR Monitoring

Post-reintroduction monitoring is necessary to evaluate the ecological response of a restored or reintroduced species and the success of the program (Lake 2001). This STGR restoration project presents a unique opportunity to improve the knowledge base for future prairie-grouse reintroductions. We will establish two main monitoring efforts. First, short-term (5-year) monitoring of radio-marked STGR will allow us to estimate parameters of population performance (e.g., fecundity, survival), as well as assess seasonal habitat selection and evaluate movements away from release sites (World Pheasant Association and IUCN/Re-introduction

Specialist Group 2009). The demographic rates (fecundity, survival, etc.) specific to the reintroduced population we collect during this time will be used to fine tune site-specific population viability analyses required for adaptive management. Second, we will implement methods to monitor population trends and status over the long-term after population establishment (World Pheasant Association and IUCN/Re-introduction Specialist Group 2009). Both aspects are necessary to validate the reintroduction effort and assess the causes of success or failure (Colorado Parks and Wildlife 2014).

3.5.1 Effects of Alternative A: No Reintroduction

- Direct Effects: No reintroduction would result in no agency or partner requirements for monitoring.
- Indirect Effects: None.

3.5.2 Effects of Alternative B: Reintroduction of STGR to the Blackfoot Valley, Northern Bitterroot Valley, and Drummond Area

- Direct Effects: Reintroduction of STGR to the Blackfoot Valley, northern Bitterroot Valley, and the Drummond area would provide FWP with three reintroduction sites that could be monitored and compared over time to inform the project on potential sources of mortality. Each site has its own strengths and weaknesses. By monitoring three sites, one with optimum seasonal habitat scores (Blackfoot), and two with contrasting habitat scores (Drummond with better brood-rearing habitat and the Bitterroot with better nesting habitat), we would gain a better understanding of these seasonal habitat needs as well as other factors that could play a role in the long-term viability of reintroduced populations.
- Indirect Effects: Monitoring at three sites would provide the best information on factors limiting STGR populations and would help inform future restoration efforts throughout the bird's range.

3.5.3 Effects of Alternative C: Reintroduction of STGR to the Blackfoot Valley and the Northern Bitterroot Valley

- Direct Effects: Reintroduction of STGR to the Blackfoot Valley and the northern Bitterroot Valley or the Drummond area would provide FWP with two reintroduction sites that could be monitored and compared over time to inform the project on

potential sources of mortality. Each site has its own strengths and weaknesses. By monitoring these two sites, one with optimum seasonal habitat scores (Blackfoot), and one with good nesting habitat (Bitterroot), we would gain a better understanding of these seasonal habitat needs as well as other factors that could play a role in the long-term-viability of reintroduced populations.

- Indirect Effects: Monitoring of STGR in these two locations would allow us to compare the importance of brood-rearing habitat to the long-term viability of newly established STGR populations. It would not allow to compare the importance of nesting habitat suitability on reintroduction efforts.

3.5.4 Effects of Alternative D: Reintroduction of STGR to the Blackfoot Valley and the Drummond Area

- Direct Effects: Reintroduction of STGR to the Blackfoot Valley and the Drummond area would provide FWP with two reintroduction sites that could be monitored and compared over time to inform the project on potential sources of mortality. Each site has its own strengths and weaknesses. By monitoring these two sites, one with optimum nesting habitat scores (Blackfoot), and one with lower scores (Drummond), we would gain a better understanding of these seasonal habitat needs as well as other factors that could play a role in the long-term-viability of reintroduced populations.
- Indirect Effects: Monitoring of STGR in two locations would allow us to compare the importance of nesting habitat quality to the long-term viability of newly established STGR populations. It would not allow to compare the importance of brood-rearing habitat suitability on reintroduction efforts.

3.5.5 Effects of Alternative E: Reintroduction of STGR to the Blackfoot Valley

- Direct Effects: Reintroduction of STGR to the Blackfoot Valley would provide FWP with one reintroduction site and the best opportunity to restore STGR to western Montana. This site could be monitored over time and provide information should FWP examine reintroductions in other areas in the future.
- Indirect Effects: It would not provide a simultaneous comparison of the importance of brood-rearing habitat and nesting habitat to the long-term viability of newly established STGR populations.

3.6 Cumulative Impacts

Several environments and human factors influence STGR source populations and their habitat. Source populations are annually influenced by predation, hunting, disease and parasitism, collisions, habitat changes, and cultivation. Despite these factors, STGR source populations have remained stable likely due to large landscapes of suitable habitat. Removal of up to 150 STGR from source populations would be minor in comparison to all these other factors (less than 1% of the estimated 2017 harvest) (Figure 6). The reintroduction areas will likely experience similar sources of mortality with one notable exception, hunting. There has been no hunting for STGR in western Montana since 1948. The reestablishment of a hunting season would be subject to successful establishment of productive STGR populations and setting sustainable harvest levels by the Fish and Wildlife Commission which is beyond the scope of this EA. Reintroduced populations are expected to have little to no effect on existing resources. However, potential habitat restoration associated with reintroductions that assist the establishing STGR population will benefit several other wildlife species associated with quality shrub-steppe habitats.

Chapter 4.0: Resources Issues Considered but Eliminated from Detailed Analysis

4.1 Vegetation and Soils

FWP will only select capture/release sites accessible by four-wheel drive vehicles or all-terrain vehicles. Due to the timing of capture/release in the fall and spring during the non-growing season, minimal vegetation impacts are expected. FWP will avoid areas where topography, soils, and/or vegetation prevent vehicle access FWP or where vehicle use will increase soil erosion.

4.2 Recreational Resources

Removal of 75-150 STGR per year for 5 years following protocol outlined previously will not have negative effects on hunting harvest or limit recreational opportunities in FWP Regions with source populations because the collections can be spread across the 4 regions of central and eastern Montana. The effects of removing this number of STGR is negligible to the population when compared to annually occurring events, such as hunter harvest (Figure 6).

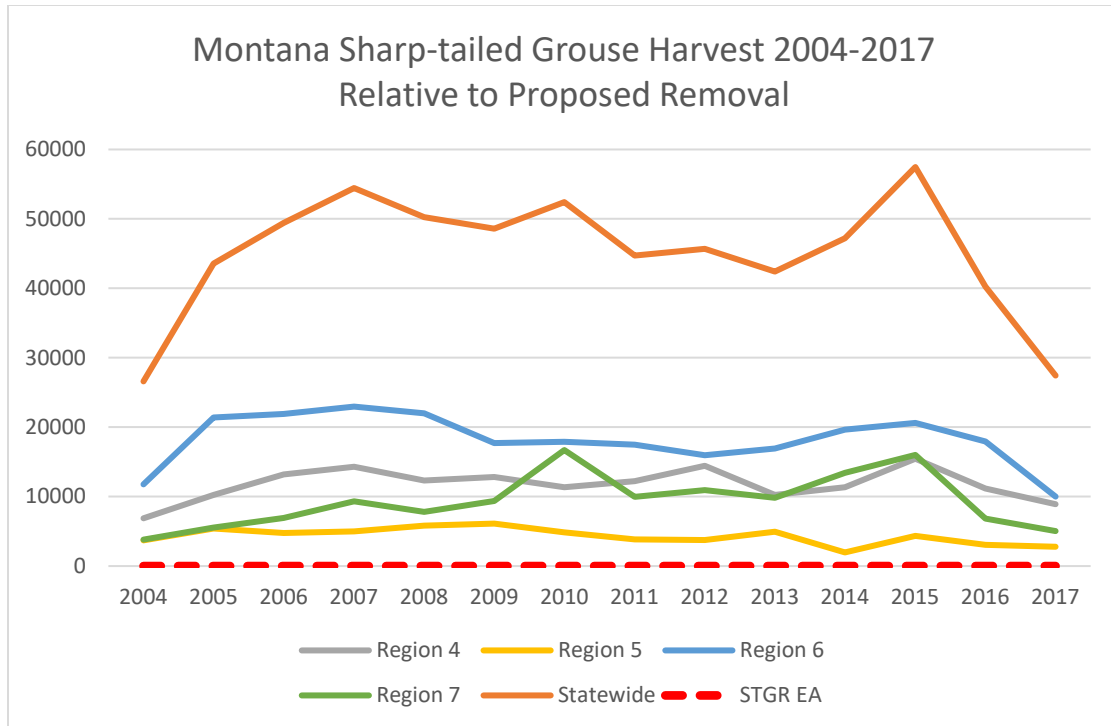


Figure 6. Chart showing annual harvest of STGR statewide and in FWP Regions 4-7 from 2004-2017 from hunter harvest data relative to the maximum number of birds requested for STGR reintroduction.

Chapter 5.0: Determination If an Environmental Impact Statement is Required

Based on the above assessment, which has not identified any significant negative impacts by the proposed action to Montana’s STGR population, *an EIS is not required*, an EA is the appropriate level of review. The overall impact from the successful completion of any alternative presented would provide long-term benefits to both the physical and human environment.

Chapter 6.0: Public Participation and Collaborators

6.1 Public Involvement

The public will be notified in the following manners to comment on this draft EA, the proposed action, and the alternatives:

- Public notices in the *Daily Inter Lake*, *Bozeman Chronicle*, *Great Falls Tribune*, *Missoulian*, *Billings Gazette*, *The Glasgow Courier*, *Have Daily News*, *Miles City Star*, and the *Helena Independent Record*.

- Public notice on the Fish, Wildlife & Parks' web page: <http://fwp.mt.gov>.
- Draft EAs will be available at Regional Headquarters across the state and at the State Headquarters in Helena.
- A news release will be prepared and distributed to a standard list of media outlets interested in FWP issues.

This level of public notice and participation is appropriate for a project of this scope, having limited impacts, many of which can be mitigated.

The public comment period will extend for 30 days. Written comments will be accepted until 5:00 p.m., March 17, 2019, and can be e-mailed to Chris Hammond at chammond@mt.gov, or mailed to the address below:

Chris Hammond
Sharp-tailed Reintroduction Environmental Assessment
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
490 North Meridian Road
Kalispell, MT 59901

6.2 Collaborators and Scoping

An informal working group for the STGR reintroduction project has been in place since 2015. This group consists of federal, state, and tribal wildlife biologists, geneticists, wildlife program managers, NGOs, and private landowners. During the habitat evaluation, FWP and its partners (U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, Big Sky Upland Game Bird Association, and MPG Ranch) worked with several large landowners and ranch managers who were generally supportive of these efforts. Although this project is to be led by FWP, the project will consult with members of the communities, interest groups, and agencies through the environmental assessment process, to incorporate comments, issues, and suggestions to the project proposal.

The following individuals provided helpful suggestions on the initial draft of the EA:

- Beau Larking, MPG Ranch
- Ben Deeble, Big Sky Upland Game Bird Association
- Catherine Wightman, FWP
- Dale Becker, CSKT
- Jake Doggett, FWP
- Kris Tempel, FWP
- John Ensign, FWP

- John Vore, FWP
- Kenneth Plourde, FWP
- Lewis Young, Retired USFS Biologist
- Scott Eggeman, FWP
- Scott Thompson, FWP

Recent project history:

1. FWP completed the habitat assessment in the spring and summer of 2015.
2. On May 12, 2016, the Fish and Wildlife Commission endorsed the development of a reintroduction plan and EA to re-establish self-sustaining STGR populations west of the Continental Divide in western Montana.
3. October 3-5, 2016, FWP provided information to Upland Gamebird Council regarding ongoing restoration efforts for STGR in western Montana. The agency received positive feedback on our efforts.
4. In May 2017, Montana State University completed the Restoration Plan for STGR Recovery in Western Montana for FWP.

6.3 Anticipated Timeline

Public Comment period on EA: February 15, 2019-March 17, 2019

Decision Notice Published: March 22, 2019

Fish and Wildlife Commission Final Decision: April 25, 2019

Potential Reintroduction of STGR to Begin: As early as fall 2019 or when we can secure funding for the duration of this 10-year project.

Chapter 7.0 EA Preparers

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