

FISH & WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: February 13, 2019

Agenda Item: Alberta sage grouse translocation

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Final

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 15 Minutes

Background: Sage-grouse in Alberta, Canada, declined from estimated highs of 1,000 - 1,500 in the early 1980s to less than 50 in 2011. After years of decline, the population stabilized during 2013-14 at a low of about 40 birds. To assist recovery, FWP cooperated in translocating 41 female birds from Phillips and Valley counties to southeast Alberta in 2011-12, and another 38 in 2016. The birds bred and integrated into the Alberta population within the first year. Alberta Environment and Parks believes the Montana birds have substantially contributed to the Alberta population and staved off extirpation. Alberta estimated their sage-grouse population at 129 in 2017 and 102 in 2018, marking the first significant increases in 20 years. Alberta has an active sage-grouse recovery program that includes habitat enhancement and securement, oil and gas reclamation, predator management, and translocation.

To continue recovery, Alberta requested up to 40 adult female sage-grouse from north-central Montana in the spring of 2018 to be translocated, which was approved by the commission last year. Due to unfavorable weather conditions, the 2018 capture did not occur; therefore, FWP is asking for commission approval to translocate 40 grouse in the spring of 2019. An additional 40 grouse may be requested in 2020. This project is covered by a 2015 Environmental Assessment that was out for public comment, and a Decision Notice signed giving approval, so there is no need for an additional public comment period, although public comment may be taken at this meeting.

Because the transplant sites are within 25 miles of Montana, Alberta's efforts may also benefit Montana because it will bolster this trans-boundary sage-grouse population. Moreover, northern Montana's sage-grouse population has been doing very well over the last few years. 2018 lek counts were near average in the general area where birds would be removed despite difficult weather conditions due to persistent snow cover. Removing up to 40 hens for translocation will not noticeably affect the population and will most likely be unmeasurable at the population level and therefore inconsequential. Instead of committing to future translocations now, FWP will evaluate populations before proposing translocations in 2020, and will only propose them dependent upon the status of the source population in Montana and the success of previously translocated birds.

Public Involvement Process & Results: FWP supports the proposal. The 2015 EA was out for public comment for 30 days. Comments were addressed in the final EA and response to comments. The December 15, 2015 decision notice found no significant impacts and recommended translocation of sage-grouse.

Alternatives and Analysis: None analyzed.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale: FWP recommends the commission endorse translocating up to 40 female sage grouse to Alberta in spring 2019 according to the terms and conditions outlined in the EA.

Proposed Motion: I move that the commission endorse FWP's proposal to translocate up to 40 female sage-grouse to Alberta in spring 2019 according to the terms and conditions outlined in the EA.