



# MONTANA FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

THE **OUTSIDE** IS IN US ALL.

**Meeting Date:** August 25, 2022

**Agenda Item:** Approval of Request to Translocate Sage-Grouse to Alberta, Canada, in 2023

**Action Needed:** Final

**Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation:** 10 minutes

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**Background:** Sage-grouse in Alberta, Canada, declined from highs of 1,000–1,500 in the early 1980s to less than 50 in 2011. In 2008, a collaborative project was initiated between Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks and Alberta Environment and Parks (AEP) to augment the endangered population of sage-grouse in southeastern Alberta. Between 2011 and 2019, 118 sage-grouse were captured in Montana and translocated to Alberta. These birds were monitored remotely using satellite transmitters, and AEP believes the Montana birds substantially helped prevent extirpation of sage-grouse in Alberta. The Alberta population is now estimated at 81 sage-grouse, three years after the last translocation.

AEP and partners are improving habitat in Alberta to increase suitability for sage-grouse. These activities include reclamation of oil and gas infrastructure, removal of anthropogenic structures to reduce predator habitat, habitat enhancements, and habitat protections.

Because the transplant sites are within 25 miles of Montana, these translocation efforts may bolster the trans-boundary sage-grouse population Montana shares. Northern Montana's sage-grouse source population has been doing well recently; the 2021 lek trend count was 38% above the long-term average. Removing up to 40 hens for translocation is unlikely to be measurable at the population level.

Previously, the Fish and Wildlife Commission approved the translocation of up to 40 sage-grouse in 2011 and an additional 40 sage-grouse in both 2015 and 2019. AEP is now requesting that the commission authorize the translocation of 40 sage-grouse during spring 2023 originally evaluated under the 2015 environmental assessment (EA), Record of Decision, and the supplemental evaluation completed in 2022.

**Public Involvement Process and Results:** In 2022, the department completed a supplemental evaluation addendum to the 2015 EA to update relevant resources. The EA and updated addendum determined that negligible negative effects would occur from this action. Nine comment letters – two supporting and seven opposed – were received on the 2015 EA. Most spoke to the effect of removing birds from Montana, while other issues raised included genetic diversity, relevant plans, disturbance to leks, predators, disease, habitat, department resources, connectivity, and the need for an environmental impact statement. All of these are addressed in the final EA and response to comments.

**Alternatives and Analysis:** None analyzed beyond that in the EA and addendum.

**Agency Recommendation and Rationale:** The department recommends the commission approve translocating sage-grouse to Alberta as outlined in the EA. The benefits to Montana include supplementing an international trans-boundary population and international expansion of sage-grouse range, which may be influential in future federal species status reviews and listing considerations.

**Proposed Motion:** I move that the Fish and Wildlife Commission approve the translocation of up to 40 sage-grouse to Alberta in 2023 as outlined in the 2015 sage-grouse translocation environmental assessment and supplemental evaluation.