

FISH & WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: June 19, 2019

Agenda Item: 2019 Fall Upland Game Bird Quotas and Limits

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Final

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 10 minutes

Background

Upland game bird season dates for 2019 were approved in February 2018. Other than normal calendar date rotation, no changes to the 2018 adopted quotas and limits are proposed.

Analysis of sage-grouse lek counts is not finished yet, but talks with area biologists and others indicate numbers are down from last year. This would be the third year of declining numbers, but not unexpected. As has been mentioned to the commission during the past two years when discussing upland game bird seasons, sage-grouse populations naturally cycle up and down and we have been expecting a downturn. Our nearly 40 years of data show a cycle of six to 10 years. The most recent high count was in 2016, and the one previous to that was in 2006. Barring severe weather or disease, this cycling is natural and expected and unrelated to carefully regulated hunting.

An analysis of the effects of sage-grouse hunting on populations was given in the July 2016 justification for reopening the season in part of the state. That analysis showed that hunting had a very minimal impact on Montana's grouse. Among 1,370 radio-collared sage-grouse, mostly females, in Montana as part of seven different studies scattered across northcentral, central and southeast Montana only nine were taken by hunters. That's about one of every 150 adult birds, or 0.7%, of the fall population, and doesn't account for young-of-the-year birds added to the population since spring. This is well below the anywhere from 11% to 25% sustainable harvest rates found in the literature.

In addition to the natural cycle, this year's count was likely influenced by the drought of last summer and fall followed by a long and snowy winter. However, conditions so far this spring, with good soil moisture for insect and forb production during hatching and early brood rearing, should be good for early sage-grouse chick survival.

Public Involvement Process & Results

If approved, public comment will be taken at this meeting.

Alternatives and Analysis

This proposal is based upon field observations and regional input and is consistent with statewide upland game bird management.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale

FWP recommends adopting the 2019 upland game bird bag and possession limits as unchanged from 2018.

Proposed Motion

I move that the Fish & Wildlife Commission approve the proposed 2019 upland game bird bag and possession limits as proposed by FWP and that all other elements except for regular calendar rotation remain unchanged from 2018.