



Fish and Wildlife Commission Presentation Summary Sheet

Meeting date:

3/26/2021

Agenda item:

Greater Sage Grouse Periodic Status Review (up-list) – Briefing and Public Hearing

Presenter(s):

Derek Stinson, Wildlife Biologist and Taylor Cotten, Conservation Assessment Section Manager, Diversity Division, Wildlife Program

Background summary:

The sage-grouse was state-listed as threatened in 1998, and a state recovery plan was completed in 2004.

The potential for wildfires to eliminate sagebrush (*Artemisia* spp.) on extensive areas has been the greatest ongoing threat to sage-grouse in Washington, as we have seen in 2020. However, with the continued decline, all of Washington's populations are now likely suffering from problems with genetic health and fitness related to small population size. Uncertainty about the long-term maintenance of habitat that depends on Farm Bill programs (CRP/SAFE) is also a major concern. Other major management issues include habitat that is fragmented by roads, agriculture, and development and degraded by past wildfires, historical excessive livestock grazing, fencing, electrical transmission lines, and exotic vegetation. Sage-grouse may suffer mortality rates above historical levels as a result of collisions with fences, powerlines, and vehicles, and higher populations of some generalist predators, especially ravens and coyotes.

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) and several partner organizations are working on habitat and other aspects of sage-grouse recovery. Without these efforts, the sage-grouse would likely decline to extinction in Washington. In Spring 2020, sage-grouse had not yet declined to population levels indicated in the 2004 state recovery plan for up-listing (<650 birds); however, that was before the devastating fires of September, and the threshold assumed that the Douglas County and JBLM-YTC populations were connected, which now appears unjustified. Due in part to their polygynous mating system, the effective size of the three populations are ~107 birds for Douglas County and ten birds for JBLM-YTC. Extinction of the Lincoln County population is all but certain, and of the JBLM-YTC within a decade or so is likely unless they can be increased substantially. The hope of any reintroductions in the future is tempered by the recent failure of the reintroduction project by the Yakama Nation, the probable failure of the Lincoln County population, and the continued loss of habitat in suitable condition by wildland fire.

Concurrent with this troubling decline, genomic analysis has indicated that Washington's population is more distinct than the Bi-state population that was proposed for listing as a threatened 'Distinct Population Segment' under the Endangered Species Act (USFWS 2019). For these reasons, it is recommended the sage-grouse be up-listed to endangered in Washington.

Staff recommendation:

Up-list Greater Sage-Grouse to Endangered classification in the state of Washington.

Policy issue(s) and expected outcome:

- Conserve, protect, and recover Washington’s native wildlife.
 - Additional recognition to the conservation need of the species.
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Fiscal impacts of agency implementation:

None.

Public involvement process used and what you learned:

In February 2020, the agency sent out a press release and posted a request on our website to solicit information from the public to be included in the coming Periodic Status Reviews and Status Reports. In accordance with WAC regulations, individuals and organizations had one year to contribute information for the reviews. Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) staff included this information as applicable in the status review documents. The documents were then reviewed by WDFW staff and external species experts before 90-day public comment periods on the document and our findings. There was substantial response to the 90-day public comment period on the Periodic Status Review with 1,257 comments in support of up-listing primarily from two form letter copies, and 1 comment not supporting the recommendation out of concern it could lead to federal listing.

Action requested and/or proposed next steps:

Department staff will request a decision at the April 22-24, 2021 Commission meeting.

Draft motion language:

Briefing and public comment only.

Post decision communications plan:

Website update, News release.
