



AGENDA ITEM SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

Oregon Sage-grouse Controlled Hunt Permits

The Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission annually adopts the Oregon Game Bird Hunting Regulations in April, establishing season dates, bag limits, open areas, and other restrictions. These adopted hunting regulations are described in the “2025-2026 Oregon Game Bird Hunting Regulations” document, which is incorporated by reference into OAR 635-053-0000.

Upland game bird harvest is managed under the “2025-2030 Oregon Upland Game Bird Hunting Season Framework” (Framework). The framework ensures that harvest is regulated to a level that does not impact the long-term viability of populations while seeking stability in upland game bird hunting seasons and regulations. Sage-grouse are a species of upland game bird for which the Framework stipulates regulating hunting opportunity through a limited number of controlled hunting permits available for each sage-grouse hunt area. Spring sage-grouse lek surveys are still underway when the Oregon Game Bird Regulations are considered for adoption in April.

Therefore, sage-grouse hunting permit numbers adopted at that time are generally set to reflect the number of permits offered in each hunt area in the previous year. This allows sage-grouse harvest information to be included in the annual Oregon Game Bird Hunting Regulations booklet. Depending on the results of spring surveys, the Department may recommend adjusting permit numbers in some or all units prior to the start of the season.

In considering whether to recommend an adjustment to permit numbers, the Department utilizes the latest information on lek (breeding ground) counts, which are not available until after the adoption of the game bird hunting regulations in April. Biologists also consider projected fall populations, past hunter participation and success rates, and extenuating factors, such as recent habitat alterations, isolated or declining populations, or other causes for concern when recommending permit levels. Permit levels are set based on a predicted level of harvest that equates to less than 5% of the projected fall population, typically between 2-4%. If, based on this analysis, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (Department) determines that an adjustment to sage-grouse hunting permit numbers is warranted, a rule amendment is considered.

At their April 18, 2025 meeting, the Commission adopted staff recommendations establishing seasons and permit numbers for 2025 controlled sage-grouse hunts as part of the Exhibit C: Oregon Game Bird Regulations. The Department is requesting Commission approval to modify permit numbers based on additional information that was not available at the April meeting.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

The Department used several approaches to gather input on sage-grouse hunting season proposals leading up Commission approval of the Framework and adoption of 2025-2026 Oregon Game Bird Hunting Regulations at their April 18, 2025 meeting. Proposed changes for the game bird hunting regulations and the Framework were provided in March 2025 to interested sporting groups and presented at the Portland and Central Oregon Sportsman's shows. Members of the public who expressed interest in the upland game bird proposals were also provided copies via email in March 2025. Additionally, the proposed Framework was posted on the ODFW website accompanied by a news release.

In anticipation of the Commission consideration of the proposed rule amendment to modify sage-grouse permit numbers for 2025, the department published notice of the proposed rulemaking (Attachment 2). Additionally, the public has an opportunity to provide comment prior to (in writing) or (orally) during the hearing that occurs at the August Commission meeting.

ISSUE 1

Approve amendment to OAR 635-053-0000 and adopt adjusted sage-grouse permits

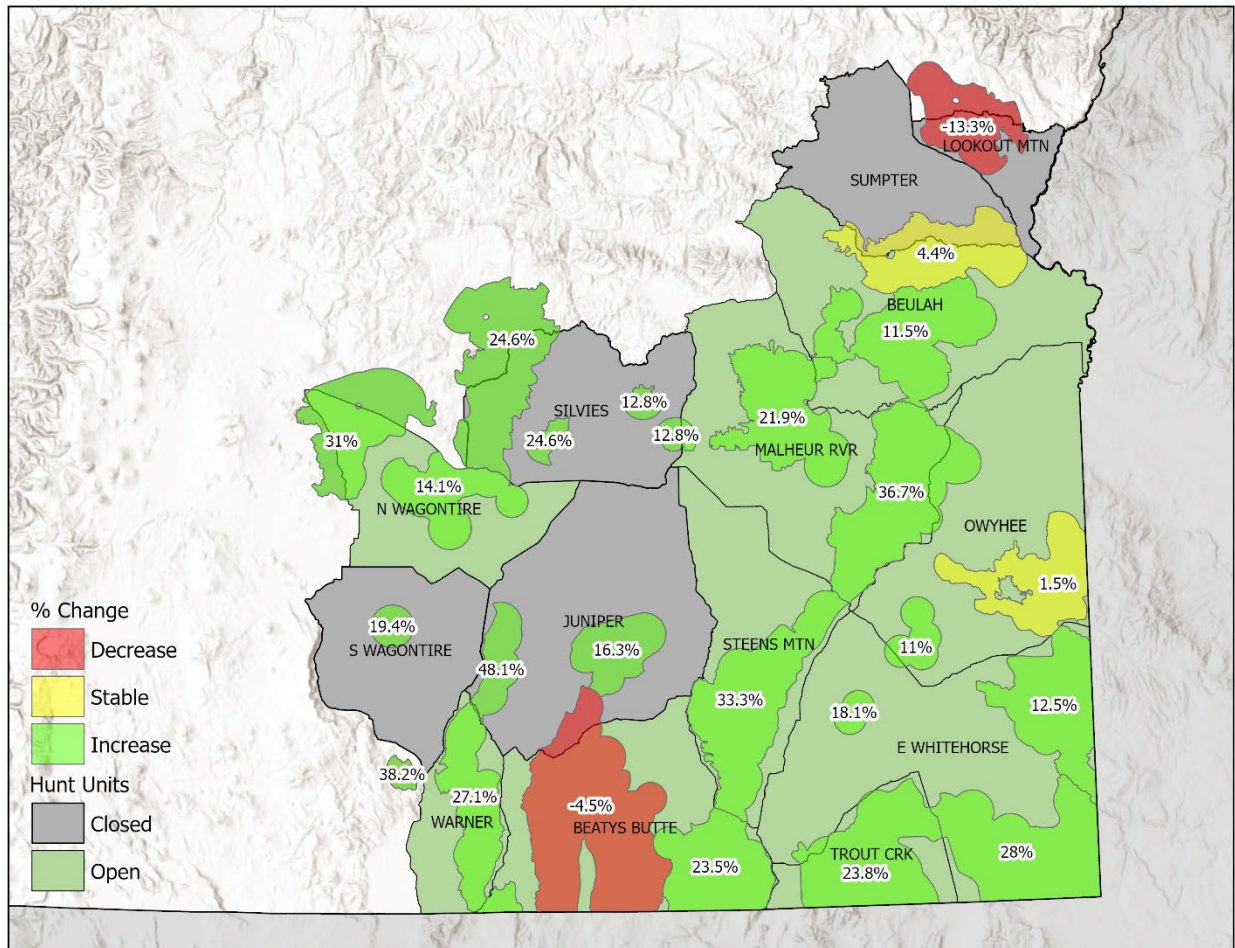
ANALYSIS

Oregon's sage-grouse population is conservatively managed pursuant to the Framework, the Oregon Sage-grouse Action Plan (Plan), and the Oregon Sage-grouse Conservation Assessment and Strategy (Strategy) with maximum hunter harvest of no more than 5% of the projected fall population in as many as 12 of 21 Wildlife Management Units (WMUs) where sage-grouse are known to occur. Limiting hunter harvest to no more than 5% of the fall population is conservatively established at half of the 10% maximum hunter harvest limit recommended in "Guidelines to Manage Sage Grouse Populations and Their Habitats" (Connelly et al. 2000). The Commission, during their April 18, 2025 meeting, adopted controlled hunt permit numbers for 10 hunt areas. The maximum number of allowed permits is dependent on the estimated fall population for each hunt area. Spring breeding population surveys were not completed until mid-May and required additional time for data entry and analysis.

For the 2025 population surveys, Department biologists found significant enough changes to sage-grouse populations in eight hunt areas to warrant proposing modification to adopted sage-grouse permit numbers for the 2025 hunting season. This proposed permit modification will keep harvest levels below the 5% threshold per hunt area, as well as redistribute some opportunity to hunt areas where sage-grouse populations showed an increasing trend.

Overall, sage-grouse populations experienced an approximate 17.8% increase from the previous year (Figure 1) and continued to show strong population growth since the last nadir (population cycle trough) in 2019. Population trends expressed as the percent change in population for each Priority Area for Conservation (PAC) is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. 2025 Sage-grouse Population Trend by PAC



All of the units with recommended increases to permit numbers experienced significant population growth in 2025. While the Beulah Unit also experienced growth, no permit increase is recommended due to impacts to the unit from fire in 2024. The Owyhee Unit continues to experience impaired habitats and population growth rates are not commensurate with adjacent units, therefore staff recommend a decrease of 5 permits in that unit. The Silvies Unit also experienced a large wildfire in 2024 which burned over some important leks. Spring access for lek surveys was limited in 2025, so staff recommend a closure for 2025 in this unit until the population can be adequately assessed. This closure was accomplished by temporary rule which will expire on August 15, 2025. The Beatys Butte Unit experienced a large fire in 2024 that burned the Hart Mountain National Antelope Refuge, which is not open to hunting. Population surveys indicated a slight decrease in this population (-4.5%), but a very large increase in the Pueblo Mountains population (+23.5%), which is also part of the Beatys Butte Unit. Staff recommend leaving permits at existing levels for this unit. Units recommended for slight permit

increases include Malheur River (+10), Trout Creek Mountains (+5), East Whitehorse (+10), Steens Mountain (+10), North Wagontire (+5), and Warner (+10), as shown in Figure 2. Altogether, these changes would increase by 3.6% the total number of permits available from 670 to 695.

Figure 2. Proposed Modification to 2025 Sage-grouse Hunting Permit Numbers by Unit

Hunt Number	Hunt Name	2025 Permits
J65	Beulah Unit	125
J66	Malheur River Unit	[100] 110
J67	Owyhee Unit	[50] 45
J68A	Trout Creek Mtns	[40] 45
J68B	E. Whitehorse	[100] 110
J69	Steens Mtn Unit	[50] 60
J70	Beatys Butte Unit	90
J72	Silvies	[20] 0
J73A	N. Wagontire	[25] 30
J74	Warner Unit	[70] 80

These proposed modifications to sage-grouse hunting permit numbers are supported by the biological data and are in alignment with the Framework, the Plan, and the Strategy. Further, except for the Silvies hunt unit, expected harvest with this level of hunting permits will supply important biological information from the wings of harvested birds useful for the management of sage-grouse populations.

OPTIONS

1. Adopt staff recommendations
2. Modify staff recommendations

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

1. Adopt staff recommendations

DRAFT MOTION:

I move to amend OAR Chapter 635, Division 53 as proposed by staff and shown in Attachment 3.

Effective Date: *Upon Filing*

Citations

Connelly, J. W., M. A. Schroeder, A. R. Sands, and C. E. Braun. 2000. Guidelines to manage sage grouse populations and their habitats. Wildlife Society Bulletin 28:967–985.

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