

Sage Grouse Status Brief – May 2019

Legal Status in Washington

1998 – WDFW classified as Threatened

2004 – WDFW Recovery Plan completed

2015 – USFWS decided WA population not a Distinct Population Segment and range-wide listing not warranted

2016 – WDFW Periodic Status Review (PSR) maintains Threatened classification

2021 – WDFW PSR planned

Recovery Plan Goal and Objectives (Stinson et al. 2004)

“The goal of the sage-grouse recovery program is to establish a viable population of sage-grouse in a substantial portion of the species' historic range in Washington.

“The sage-grouse will be considered for up-listing to State Endangered if: There is a breeding season population of < 650 birds in Washington and the population continues to decline.”

Estimated population of greater sage-grouse in Washington State

The 2019 population is estimated at 676 individuals, representing a declining overall trend (Fig 1). Figure 2 depicts population estimates and the distribution of population centers in 2019. 225 males were counted on 17 leks (13.2 males per active lek) in the Moses Coulee population (Douglas County), 30 males were counted on 3 leks (10.0 males per active lek) in the Yakima Training Center population, 5 males were counted on 1 lek in the Crab Creek population, and no males were counted in the Yakama Nation population. The counts represented a slight increase in the Moses Coulee population from 2018, but the other 3 populations declined.

The Yakama Nation population appears to be extirpated, following a reintroduction attempt. The Crab Creek population appears to be at risk of extirpation following a reintroduction attempt. The other two populations are endemic and have their own set of issues. The Moses Coulee population increased slightly, but has not recovered from the declines associated with the massive conversion of CRP that started in 2010-2011 (see habitat status, below). The Yakima Training Center population has declined steadily for decades, despite population augmentation efforts, but now appears at serious risk of extirpation. There have been 6 active leks in most recent years on the Yakima Training Center until 2019 when the number of active leks declined from 6 to 3. This suggests that the future on the YTC is bleak for sage-grouse.

Genetic uniqueness of Washington sage-grouse

Preliminary results from work being conducted by USGS in Fort Collins, Colorado indicate that greater sage-grouse in Washington are the most genetically unique of any subpopulation in North America. The next most unique subpopulation is the Bi-state population on the border of California and Nevada (Bi-state); the Bi-state population was being considered as a “Distinct Population Segment” by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. In addition to the genetic characteristics, sage-grouse in Washington are more likely to nest, are more likely to re-nest, and they lay more eggs (Schroeder 1997). Sage-grouse in Washington are also at least 10% larger than sage-grouse to the south.

Habitat status

Wildfires (YTC, Moses Coulee, and Crab Creek) appear to be impacting habitat availability, particularly in the short term. The impacts appear to be greatest on the YTC. Loss of Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) fields was an issue in the Moses Coulee, particularly starting in 2010-2011 when fields were converted from CRP to State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE), which required tilling of fields making them unsuitable in the short term. This situation appears to have moderated in Douglas County as the SAFE fields have stabilized and grown into better habitat condition. While Farm Bill incentive programs (i.e., CRP, SAFE) are critically important tools,

they do not provide permanent habitat protection. Well over 70,000 acres of CRP fields in Washington are due to expire by 2024 (fig. 3) and options for re-enrollment may be limited or uncertain.

Other major management issues include habitat that is fragmented by roads, agriculture, and development and degraded by past wildfires, historical excessive livestock grazing (which has left areas with little or no understory, therefore ill-suited for nesting), 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 predators.

Conservation actions

For many years, Douglas County agricultural producers have supported wildlife conservation through voluntary incentive-based conservation programs offered through the Farm Bill. CRP has been very popular and is an important tool for wildlife habitat conservation. Farmers have enrolled nearly 73,000 acres in the Sage and Sharp-tailed Grouse State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE) program. SAFE is a partnership between USDA and state fish and wildlife agencies to provide quality wildlife habitat through CRP. WDFW private lands wildlife biologists (PLBs) continue active delivery of these incentive programs to protect and restore habitat and promote recovery. These efforts include the Sage and Sharp-tailed Grouse SAFE in Douglas County and over 19,500 acres enrolled in the Shrubsteppe SAFE in Lincoln, Grant, Adams, and Okanogan Counties. The PLBs also promote the efforts of partners including the Natural Resources Conservation Service Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI), the Douglas County Multi-Species General Conservation Plan, and Voluntary Stewardship Program.

Many fences have been marked to reduce collisions in the Moses Coulee and Crab Creek populations and efforts continue. Several miles of electrical distribution lines have also been removed and/or buried in the Crab Creek Unit to remove perches for predatory birds. Augmentations and re-introductions have been pursued, but managers of source populations (Oregon, Idaho, and Nevada) have recently not been willing to provide birds, particularly when their populations are down.

Periodic status review and reclassification process

A periodic status review (PSR) for Sage Grouse is planned to be completed by January 2021. For that effort, staff will evaluate the population and habitat status, factors affecting sage grouse, and conservation trajectory in order to make a recommendation to FWC for status classification. The administrative process to collect information and complete a PSR can take up to 18 months (see steps below). The Agency can also implement emergency rule changes, which take immediate effect, and are followed by the regular administrative process.

Administrative Steps

1. Agency notifies parties that have expressed interest of the PSR. 1 year minimum; can be concurrent with steps 1-3 below.
2. Agency files CR-101 announcing the intent to review and requesting relevant information from the public. 45-days minimum
3. Agency develops draft Periodic Status Review document, includes summarizing data, narrative drafting, peer review. 3 months minimum.
4. Draft PSR goes out for required 90-day public comment period
5. If rule change recommended, required 30-day SEPA comment period and 35-day CR-102 filing comment period; can be concurrent with 90-day comment period from step 4.
6. Agency incorporates comment, finalizes draft, presents to recommendation to FWC. 1 month.
7. FWC makes decision on recommendation. 1 month.
8. If reclassification is decided, agency files CR-103; rule change goes into effect 30 days after filing.

What is the effect of uplisting?

The most impactful effect of uplisting from Threatened to Endangered is the strong message it sends. Uplisting opens the door to more urgent conversations with public and private entities and individuals regarding what we can do to reverse downward trends. Uplisting can also create greater opportunities for funding.

In the regulatory realm, Threatened and Endangered species are treated the same in the Priority Habitats and Species (PHS) program, which garners them attention and consideration from local jurisdictions that regulate land use. Threatened and Endangered species are classified and prosecuted under different WACs and RCWs and have slightly different definitions for take and associated penalties.

WAC 220-200-100 classifies protected wildlife, which includes Threatened, Sensitive, and Other Protected; Unlawful taking of protected wildlife is a misdemeanor (RCW 77.15.130), which can carry a penalty of up to 90-days in jail and up to \$1,000 fine (RCS 9A.20.021). Additionally, there is a \$2,000 fine imposed for taking that results in death of ferruginous hawk, bald eagle, golden eagle, or peregrine falcon.

WAC 220-610-010 classifies Endangered species; Unlawful taking of an Endangered species in the second degree (1st offense) is a gross misdemeanor, which can be punished by up to 364 days in jail and up to \$5,000 (RCW 9A.20.021). For the 2nd offense within five years, or unlawful taking of an Endangered species in the first degree, is a class C felony (RCW 77.15.120), which can be punished by up to 5 years in jail and up to \$10,000 fine. Taking an Endangered species in the first degree also results in suspension of hunting privileges for 2 years.

Figure 1. WA population estimates 1964-2019

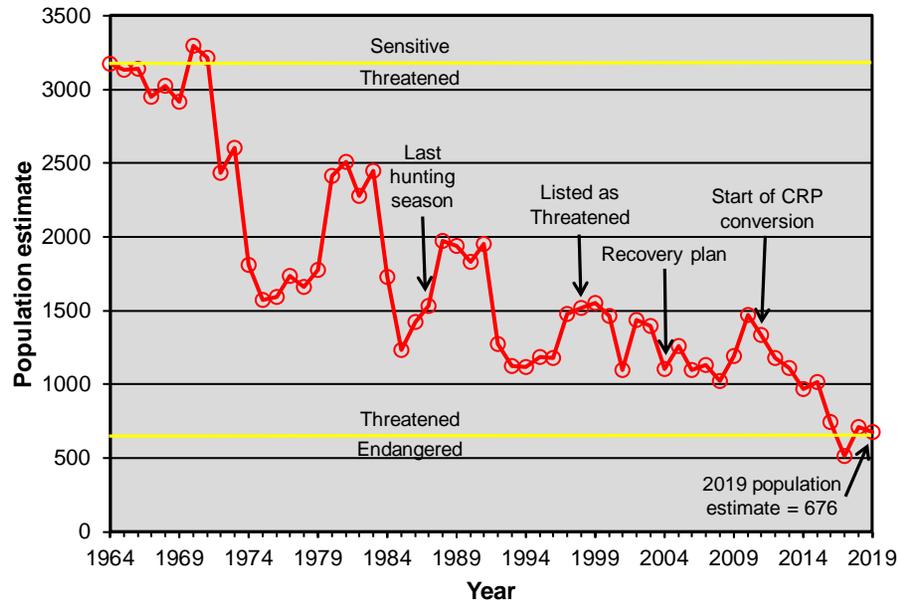


Figure 2. 2019 estimates in WA population centers

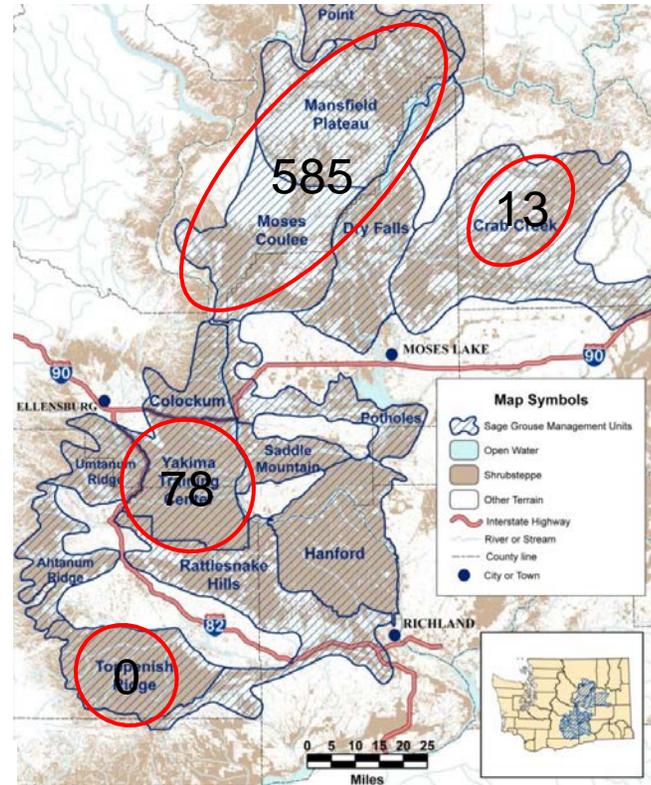
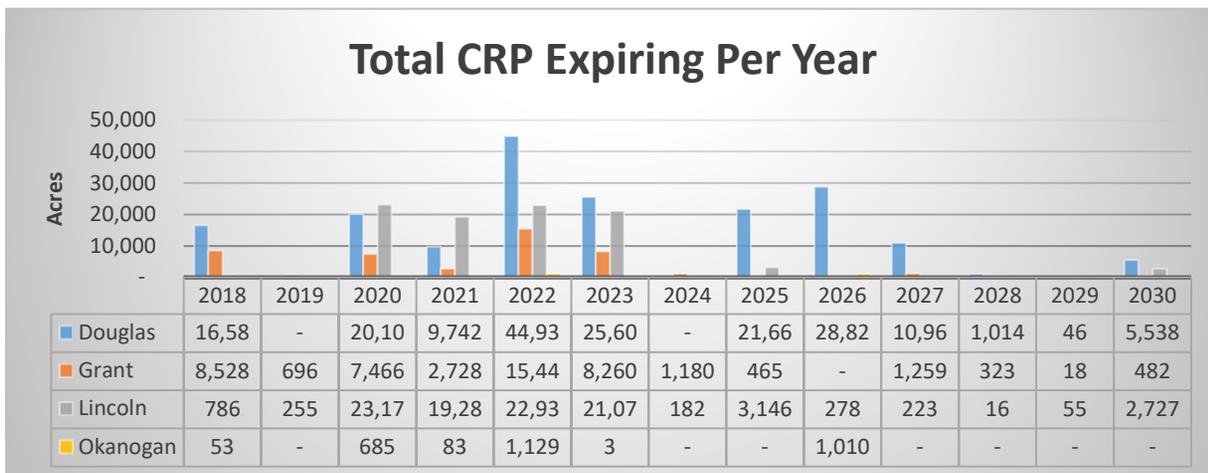


Figure 3. Conservation Reserve Program agreements due to expire in Washington



Compiled by WDFW Wildlife Program, Diversity Division – 31 May 2019
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