

Montana approves relocation of sage grouse to Canada

January 14 2016, by Matt Volz

Montana will send dozens of sage grouse to the Canadian province of Alberta in a plan approved Thursday that faces opposition from some lawmakers who say the state should first look to bolster its own fragile population of the bird.

The Montana Fish and Wildlife Commission voted 3-1 to relocate 40 greater sage grouse hens this year across the border to Alberta, where an estimated 100 to 120 of the birds are left. The sage grouse in Alberta and Montana make up a transboundary population, and the program should result in healthier numbers on both sides of the border, officials said.

"We have worked hard with Alberta to get this to fruition," Montana Fish and Wildlife Commission Chairman Dan Vermillion said. "It seems to be working up there, and Montana has a lot to benefit."

However, the commission stopped short of authorizing the relocation of all 120 birds requested by Alberta officials over five years. After hearing opposition from members of the state's Environmental Quality Council, the wildlife commission approved only the first year's relocation and promised to evaluate the program before authorizing the others.

Federal officials announced restrictions last year on 67 million acres of public lands in 11 states, including Montana, to protect the bird's habitat and prevent it from becoming a threatened or endangered species. Montana is taking its own measures to protect sage grouse habitat on state lands and to give incentives to keep landowners from damaging the

bird's habitat.

Several Montana lawmakers oppose the relocation plan because of the politics that have surrounded protecting the bird at the expense of economic development. The Environmental Quality Council on Thursday sent a letter to the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks agency requesting a three-year block on moving the birds out of the country.

Instead, a relocation program should take place within the state, from areas where there are an abundance of sage grouse to those where there are few, said Sen. Jim Keane, D-Butte.

Others on the council suggested that the sage grouse could be moved to the border but kept in Montana. The birds could then fly to the Canadian side or stay on the Montana side.

John Vore, the game management bureau chief for Fish, Wildlife and Parks, said the bird is doing well wherever there is suitable sagebrush habitat in Montana. The 40 sage grouse would be removed from an area where there are an estimated 10,000 birds.

"I doubt we would even be able to tell the removal of 40 birds from a population of this size," Vore said. "The threat to Montana is the loss of habitat, rather than the loss of a few birds here."

The Alberta government's study identifies specific breeding grounds where the birds would be taken. The relocation would be supplemented by researching the Canadian and U.S. populations with the goal of increasing their connectivity with genetically similar populations in Montana.

A previous relocation of 41 sage grouse was done in 2011 and 2012. Thirteen of the females in that group initiated nests and only two nests

resulted in hatchlings, while a number of the birds were killed by predators.

Officials on both sides of the border said the pilot program showed the Montana birds could integrate with the Alberta population.

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