Wildlife

Monitoring Results:

In 1994 the Sage Grouse was designated a USFS Region 1 Sensitive Species for the Beaverhead National Forest (see letter from Regional Forester, June 1994). Prior to this listing, sage grouse were addressed in all pertinent environmental documents as a management indicator species. They are now addressed in the biological evaluations as required for sensitive species.

The species was listed by the Forest Service as sensitive in response to significant cumulative population declines starting in the 1980's. The Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks conduct sage grouse population surveys and hunter harvest counts to monitor sage grouse population trends. The Beaverhead Forest and Bureau of Land Management biologists assist with these trend counts.

In southwestern Montana, sage grouse numbers and harvest figures fell sharply in the early 1980's, and reached the lowest level on record in 1993. This was attributed to a cold winter and cold and wet spring and summer in 1993; these conditions hindered hatchling survival. Sage grouse, as well as most upland game bird species, suffered from low production that year. Despite a wet and cold early spring in 1994, the warm and dry conditions over the summer contributed to better hatchling survival. This lead to relatively higher counts of breeding birds on leks during 1995 (G.Hammond, pers. comm. 1996; Region 3 Areas Biologist, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks). Although higher, these numbers did not begin to reach numbers observed on some leks previous to the 1990's. Sage Grouse numbers in 1996 were lower than in 1995; on some leks numbers were only half the numbers found in 1995.

In 1995, a Challenge Cost Share Project with the Idaho Fish and Game was implemented. Two reports were produced on sage grouse lek attendance and distribution, and productivity and survival (see Crowley and Connelly 1996 and 1997). These reports contain and compare data available from 1910 to the early 1990's for the Upper Snake River Plain of SE Idaho and for Beaverhead County in SW Montana. These data were compared with information on sagebrush manipulation and land uses trends over the same period.

In Idaho the records on sagebrush manipulation were more complete than for Montana. It's reported that sagebrush manipulation at leks and adjacent areas was negatively correlated with lek attendance for all areas where data was available (see Crowely and Connelly 1996). It was demonstrated that disturbances at and throughout lek vicinities may precede or bring about population declines if impacts occur on adjacent nesting and brood rearing habitat. A time lag of no use was found in some areas because of the birds strong fidelity to breeding sites. It was concluded that the overall impact of habitat manipulation poses, overtime, a negative one on site attendance.

It was found that the collapse of the breeding population in Beaverhead County during the 1990's (as seen from the cumulative total), was not supported by data from individual leks. Some leks showed increasing trends of lek attendance while others had significantly low lek attendance. Overall however, populations have steadily decreased as has hunter harvest. Some of this reduction is attributed to reduction of sage grouse populations in southeastern Idaho, because some of these birds migrate to and are hunted in southwestern Montana.

Crowley, C. M. and J. W. Connelly. 1996. Sage grouse population and trends in southeastern Idaho and southwestern Montana. Idaho Department of Fish and Game, Pocatello, ID. 205 pp.

Crowley, C.M. and J.W. Connelly. 1997. Trends in agriculatural lands in sage grouse range in southeast Idaho and southwest Montana. Idaho Department of Fish and Game, Pocatello, ID. 56 pp.