

## Experimental Farming of Sage-grouse | Requires cautious rule-making

### *How to cause the least harm to the wild populations*

This year, the Wyoming Legislature directed the Game and Fish Department to write regulations that would allow **private bird farms** to raise Greater Sage-grouse. Incredibly, this legislation allows these businesses to collect grouse eggs **from the wild** in order to **experiment in a risky attempt** to create a captive breeding population. This bill **disregards the expertise of wildlife biologists**, who oppose sage-grouse farming, **privatizes wildlife** owned by all Wyoming citizens, and **has the potential to undermine the collaboratively crafted conservation measures** produced by Wyoming decision-makers and grouse experts in order to keep the bird off the Endangered Species Act.

Given that this is state law due to go into effect in September 2017, it is essential that the Wyoming Game and Fish Department's regulations are enforceable, specific, and create transparency around this risky private venture. **These regulations should minimize the harm to native grouse populations—both to nesting grouse during the egg collection phase and during the release of any pen-raised birds.**

### What the science says:

- Sage-grouse have been reared in captivity but only at very small scales, with great difficulty, and limited success. Because Greater sage-grouse populations in Wyoming are neither very small nor genetically or geographically isolated, scientists do not recommend captive brood-rearing as a viable conservation technique for these birds.
- One study successfully hatched wild-collected eggs, but 40% of those chicks died in captivity and all that were released perished. The release of captive-raised grouse will not result in long-term population increases, as these birds will be ill-equipped to deal with wild conditions.
  - *Sage-grouse chicks imprint on the landscape and learn how to avoid predators—farm-raised birds will not have these skills.*

### Why grouse farming now?

- Speculation about captive rearing for sage-grouse has been around for years. A decade ago, sage-grouse working groups in Wyoming rejected the idea that farming grouse could be a conservation measure to augment native populations.
  - *Thus, sage-grouse farming was not included as a conservation measure in any of the two Governors' Executive Orders on sage-grouse. Nor has this been adopted in other states.*
  - *Wyoming sage-grouse have a habitat, not a population, problem. Habitat conservation is the key to keeping these birds off the Endangered Species List.*
- This year, an influential industrialist successfully lobbied the Legislature to pass a bill to privatize our birds for speculative commercial gain.
  - *Governor Mead allowed this bill to pass into law, notably without his signature, and expressed his desire that the efforts to keep the bird off the Endangered Species List not be lost.*
  - *Additionally, the Governor asked that the rules are promulgated such that no financial burden is incurred for the State as a result of this law.*
- Some lawmakers wanted to allow each permitted farm to collect 1000 eggs—thankfully, reasonable legislators pushed back on this idea and the rules only allow the collection of 250 eggs from 40 nests annually for each licensee.

### How to cause the least harm:

- The Wyoming Game and Fish Department should limit the number of licenses to no more than three certified farms

per year.

- It is essential that wild egg collection be done with the least impact to wild populations. Private collectors should be accompanied by Wyoming Game and Fish Department personnel, and collection should occur no later than May 15 to avoid impacting sage-grouse with young chicks.
  - *Eggs must be collected in a manner that lessen risks to nesting sage-grouse and surrounding grouse (nest abandonment, increased hen stress levels, predator attraction are all concerns).*
  - *Any eggs damaged or destroyed during collection or before arrival at the facility must be counted towards the 250 egg quota for each licensee.*
- Given the importance of the native populations in designated Core Areas, egg collection should only be allowed to occur in non-core areas. Similarly, release of captive-reared birds should only be allowed in non-core areas.
- Before any captive-reared birds are released, the farm must be certified as disease-free. Infrastructure should include quarantine pens, mosquito netting, deterrence of imprinting on other species, and appropriate feed. Inspections should occur bi-annually.
  - *All infrastructure should be designed with consideration to the results from peer-reviewed scientific studies.*
- Permit fees should include the costs incurred by the Wyoming Game and Fish to monitor egg collection and bird release, to oversee the facility, and to enforce the regulations.
- Permit review should be an annual process that ensures licensees have met all requirements before permits are re-issued. Additionally, the Commission should determine standards of success before recertification, which should include review of rigorous monitoring results. Monitoring should be done for both the released birds and for the wild populations where captive-raised sage-grouse are released.
  - *Permit approval should be based on assurances that a specified threshold of survival of released captive-raised sage-grouse is met and wild populations are not negatively impacted. These impacts should include evaluation that re-introduction does not (1) decrease breeding success of wild individuals, (2) increase predation of the population in general, (3) spread disease, and (4) weaken genetics of the wild population.*
  - *Farms should not be permitted to collect an additional 250 eggs each year if they cannot demonstrate success raising chicks and keeping adult birds alive.*

### How you can help:

- The Wyoming Game and Fish Department is accepting public comment on the draft regulations. This is an important opportunity to make sure that the final regulations incorporate rigorous requirements that will minimize negative impacts to grouse. **Comments must be received by 5pm on July 25th.**
  - Submit online comments: <https://wgfd.wyo.gov/Get-Involved/Public-Meetings>
  - Or mail them to: Wyoming Game and Fish Department, Regulations, 3030 Energy Lane, Casper, WY 82604
  - A public meeting is being held to answer questions and accept comment on June 14th in Casper. <https://wgfd.wyo.gov/News/Online-and-in-person-sage-grouse-game-bird-farm-re>
- The Wyoming Game and Fish Commission will review the draft regulations, submitted comments, and will take more comments before approving the regulations. The Commission must approve regulations by September 1, 2017. A final opportunity to make comments will be at the August 23rd meeting in Casper.
  - And consider contacting your commissioner prior to the meeting. <https://wgfd.wyo.gov/About-Us/Game-and-Fish-Commission/Meet-the-Commissioners>