

SAGE GROUSE STATUS AND HARVEST OPPORTUNITIES IN NORTHEASTERN MONTANA ^{TWS}

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A population of sage grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*) in Valley County, Montana were first investigated 45 years ago. Three leks have been surveyed over most of this time period. Since 1989, managers have intensively surveyed a 36,000 ha block area within the county. Information from this block area has become the tool for local managers in assessing sage grouse trends. In past two years sage grouse leks in the entire southern half of the county have been searched for and surveyed. Numbers of male sage grouse observed in 2000 numbered over 1300 in Valley County. By using the relationship between the block area, total counts over the past two years and fall wing harvest collections, managers were able to estimate spring and fall populations since 1989. Yearly estimates from the statewide harvest surveys have found the harvest in Valley County to vary from just over 250 to over 1800 sage grouse since 1989. During this period, hunting seasons varied from 62 to 107 days in length, had daily limits between 2 and 4 birds and possession limits between 6 and 16 birds. Comparisons between the population and harvest estimates reveal a population that is independent of the liberal hunting opportunities offered.