

The fires have been (and since uncontained, continue to be) devastating. Washington's shrub-steppe ecosystem was already one of its most endangered at 40% of its historic extent due to agricultural and other human development fragmentation. Huge swaths of WDFW wildlife areas in Okanogan, Douglas, and Lincoln Counties that are owned as protected areas for greater sage-grouse and Columbian sharp-tailed grouse have been consumed.

The day after what we're calling the "worst Labor Day ever," initial on-the-ground assessment found 33 sharp-tailed and sage-grouse leks burned in Douglas and Okanogan Counties. Sage-grouse winter habitat has been severely impacted on the Douglas Plateau. I haven't yet checked the status of the Pearl Canyon fire today to see if it blew up in Central Ferry Canyon. That would consume more sharp-tailed habitat. In Lincoln County, with which I'm most familiar, 90% of Swanson Lakes Wildlife Area burned. We've lost all sharp-tailed leks and the only sage-grouse lek. The sage-grouse population was a restored of a previously extirpated population. It had been in precarious shape so we figure it's the nail in the coffin.

What we saw after the 2015 Carleton Complex fires was that sharp-tailed grouse counts (based on lek surveys) plummet for a year or two but once the grass grows back, the birds return. One positive piece is that all of our wildlife areas have undergone extensive field restorations and with some minimal post-fire re-seeding, the grass and forbs can return healthily, supporting sharp-tailed reproductive areas. Wintering shrubs and trees can be a little trickier.

The sage-grouse will fare far worse because they need shrubs and their return will be slow. Gray rabbitbrush grows back quickly but is not preferred for either nesting or forage. The needed sage-brushes and bitterbrush return much more slowly (We're talking decades.) and the current moonscape appearance looks like extensive shrub destruction. The Swanson Lakes manager told me he hasn't seen a sagebrush since the fire blazed through.

Swanson Lakes is going to be an unfortunate natural experiment for both species. The sharp-tailed grouse population there is completely isolated from other population groups and has little nearby escape for either reproductive or wintering habitat.

Also, the largest of 3 pygmy rabbit enclosures is a complete loss as well as one of the release areas. There are still pygmy rabbits, including a few free ranging but the population was hit really hard. Other state species of greatest conservation need off the top of my head that are impacted include short-eared owl, sage thrasher, sagebrush sparrow, loggerhead shrike, sagebrush lizard, pygmy short-horned lizard, both species of jackrabbit, Washington ground squirrel, American badger and while not species of greatest conservation need, we've lost huge amounts of habitat for important mule deer herds and the recently re-introduced pronghorn.

I have not yet heard about whether the Taylor Pond fire on the Yakima Training Center involves any of the grouse protected areas.

WDFW has kept our lands open. While the attached flier refers to specific dates, the humidity in Eastern Washington remains extremely low and the fuels are high in unburned areas. Until we have rain, please consider these precautions on our lands.

Kim

Kim Marie Thorburn, MD, MPH