

PROBLEMS AND STRATEGIES FOR RUFFED GROUSE MANAGEMENT IN MAINE

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Problem 1: Knowledge of hunter harvests, harvest rates, and population densities is needed to manage this species in a responsible, scientifically sound, and sustainable manner.

Strategy 1.1: Implement surveys to annually collect hunter harvest data (e.g., via mail surveys or via survey during license purchase (similar to Harvest Information Program survey)).

Strategy 1.2: Conduct investigations to determine harvest rates and population densities of Ruffed Grouse in Maine, and to determine the maximum sustainable harvest rate.

Strategy 1.3: Secure agency commitment and adequate funding for this program.

Problem 2: Lack of personnel time and funding to implement population, habitat, and outreach goals and objectives.

Strategy 2.1: The department must secure adequate funding and/or redistribute existing personnel to support annual programmatic needs, including acquisition of hunter harvest information, habitat management on public lands, and a Ruffed Grouse outreach program.

Strategy 2.2: The department needs to obtain additional sources of funds to address priority research needs.

Strategy 2.3: Support and work through federal assistance programs (e.g., Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program, Forest Stewardship Program, Stewardship Incentives Program) to implement habitat objectives.

Problem 3: Forest practices on private land depend largely on market forces (forest products supply and demand) and forestry regulations.

Strategy 3.1: The department needs to provide technical support and information regarding the effects of various forestry practices on grouse habitat, and to assess potential effects of forestry regulations on wildlife.

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Strategy 3.2: When the effects of a silvicultural practice on grouse habitat are not known but are thought to be important, the department needs to conduct investigations to understand those effects.

Strategy 3.3: The department and partners need to work with industrial landowners to encourage forest management practices that will benefit grouse and other early successional forest wildlife.

Strategy 3.4: The department needs to be involved in developing and reviewing criteria that are used in forest certification programs (e.g., programs of the Forest Stewardship Council, Sustainable Forestry Initiative), and ensure that habitat features that are important to Ruffed Grouse are given full consideration in these certification programs.

Strategy 3.5: The department must secure adequate funding and/or redistribute existing personnel to provide support for this program.

Problem 4: Many small non-industrial forest land ownerships are unmanaged, or managed for mature or old growth forest; as a result of forest maturation, these stands are becoming poor habitat for grouse and other wildlife that use early-successional habitats.

Strategy 4.1: In conjunction with partners, develop and implement a program to increase the awareness and understanding of Ruffed Grouse and other wildlife that use early-successional habitats in Maine.

Strategy 4.2: Work with partners to develop new outreach materials and adapt existing educational materials and resources for use in Maine.

Strategy 4.3: Work with partners to improve wildlife extension capabilities within Maine.

Strategy 4.4: The department must secure adequate funding and/or redistribute existing personnel to provide support for this program.

Problem 5: Many publics perceive that timber harvesting, and clear cutting in particular, is “bad” for wildlife, and that managing for mature or old growth forest is “good” for wildlife; consequently, early successional habitats and the wildlife that depend on them are declining in the more densely populated areas of the state, and on many national forests and national parks.

Strategy 5.1: In conjunction with partners, develop and implement a program to increase awareness and understanding of early successional habitats and the wildlife that depend on them. The program should include development

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and dissemination of educational material in a variety of media, as well as habitat management demonstration areas near human population centers and in national, state, and local parks.

Strategy 5.2: The department and partners must secure adequate funding and/or redistribute existing personnel to provide support for this program.

Problem 6: Since the advent of modern moose hunting seasons and improved road access in northern Maine, many grouse hunters have become concerned that increased hunting pressure on grouse, both by moose hunting parties and by others who have recently “discovered” northern Maine grouse hunting, may be negatively affecting the grouse population, as well as the traditional grouse hunting experience. The kill of grouse in northern Maine seems to be related to road access, with much of the harvest concentrated on or along roads; conflicts among grouse hunters, and conflicts with moose hunters may result from “road hunting”. An inordinate proportion of the seasonal grouse kill in northern Maine seems to be concentrated during the first 2 or 3 weeks of October (which includes one week of moose season), and oftentimes relatively little opportunity to harvest grouse exists during the remaining 2 months of the season due to severely reduced grouse numbers over much of the region. However, the only data that IFW collect regarding grouse harvests are from annual mail surveys of moose hunters; IFW does not currently collect information on statewide grouse hunter densities, grouse harvests, harvest rates, and population densities that would enable the department to monitor grouse populations or to assess the effects of hunting on grouse populations. Further, the relationship between grouse habitat quality and proximity to roads is unclear.

Strategy 6.1: Implement surveys to annually collect hunter harvest data (e.g., via mail surveys, via survey during license purchase (similar to Harvest Information Program survey), and/or during hunter bag checks/interviews).

Strategy 6.2: Conduct investigations to determine harvest rates and population densities of Ruffed Grouse in Maine, to assess the effects of hunting on local populations of Ruffed Grouse in northern Maine, to determine the maximum sustainable harvest rate, and to assess the spatial relationship between roads, survival of grouse, and habitat quality.

Strategy 6.3: Conduct investigations to develop strategies that will promote the distribution of the grouse harvest more evenly throughout the season and throughout the habitat. Potential strategies may include: 1) implementing a reduced possession limit during a portion of the season; 2) implementing a reduced daily bag limit during a portion of the season; 3) encouraging land owners to limit vehicular access to some roads; 4) developing and distributing educational outreach materials that encourage high standards of fair chase and hunting away from driveable roads.

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Strategy 6.4: Secure adequate funding to hire personnel and provide logistical support for this program.

Problem 7: Upland bird hunters have reported conflicts with deer hunters during the early portion of the firearms deer season. The public working group indicated that satisfaction among grouse hunters, particularly those who use dogs, would be increased if the overlap during October between the regular firearms deer season and the grouse hunting season were eliminated by starting the deer season no earlier than November 1. Currently, the regular firearms deer season follows the previous legislated framework: the season runs for 4 full consecutive weeks, ending on the Saturday after Thanksgiving; a Saturday “residents-only” day of deer hunting precedes the Monday opener of the regular deer season. During most years this season structure causes the deer season to begin on the last Saturday in October, and may put up to 4 days of the firearms deer season in October. Decreasing the amount of overlap in October between firearms deer hunting and grouse hunting seasons will reduce the likelihood of conflicts between deer hunters and grouse hunters, particularly those who hunt over dogs. Setting the regular firearms deer season several days later than the current structure allows would result in seasons that, on average, more evenly bracket the peak of the breeding season (rut), and therefore would likely increase the deer encounter rate (and satisfaction) for deer hunters, as well as improve satisfaction among upland bird hunters.

Strategy 7.1: In 2001, the Legislature changed the deer season framework to allow for open seasons on deer during September 15-December 15, with the requirement “(I)n any year that the regular season extends beyond November 30th, the regular season must start no later than the 4th Monday preceding Thanksgiving.” This change in law gives the Commissioner the ability to eliminate the October overlap between grouse and firearms deer seasons by adjusting the regular firearms deer season dates to a beginning date of November 1 or later.