

To: Honorable Members of the Ohio Wildlife Council
RE: Changes to the current ruffed grouse hunting season and bag limits
Position: Opposed
Date: 2/15/2023

Honorable Members of the Ohio Wildlife Council,

The Ruffed Grouse Society and American Woodcock Society understand Ohio Wildlife Council's concern over ruffed grouse population declines; we share your concern and commend you for bringing this issue to the forefront. Action must be taken; However, we do not believe season closure is the right action.

Habitat degradation is the primary driver of grouse decline in Ohio (and across the eastern U.S.). A recent report makes this clear:

... grouse populations will continue their rapid decline in the Eastern U.S unless wildlife agencies, partners, and landowners undertake immediate conservation efforts. While some are conducting site-specific habitat management, the scope of the grouse decline calls for a different approach. Large scale strategic planning and prioritized implementation of habitat management by conservation partners is needed to sustain ruffed grouse populations in the Eastern U.S. (Association of Fish & Wildlife Agencies', Eastern Grouse Working Group – December 2020).

One need only look to other states who sought to remedy the grouse decline through season closures, instead of prioritized habitat actions, to see where Ohio could be headed. Indiana closed hunting seasons in 2015. 5 years later, ruffed grouse were listed as state endangered. New Jersey closed hunting seasons in 2019, and now grouse are destined for state listing there as well. The science and past experience tell us that season closures aren't a solution and habitat management must be the priority.

We also believe that season closures impart a defeatist attitude among conservationists who would otherwise rally around efforts. Full season closure feels like the final nail in the coffin, so why bother.

We support the Ohio Department of Natural Resource's current recommendation to stay the course with no significant changes to ruffed grouse hunting seasons. Any consideration of future closures should be temporary and connected directly to landscape scale habitat restoration. While we support the Department's current season recommendations, we also implore them to lead a concerted forest habitat restoration effort.

For over 60 years, the Ruffed Grouse Society and our members have worked to support forest wildlife by ensuring healthy forest habitat. Ruffed grouse are a bellwether and managing forests in a science-based, thoughtful manner helps ensure biodiversity across the board.

We encourage the Ohio Department of Natural Resources to work with us and other organizations to address habitat as the primary cause of forest wildlife decline. Creating and maintaining suitable habitat for ruffed grouse will benefit many species cited in Ohio's State Wildlife Action Plan.

In conclusion, we appreciate the consideration you have given this issue and do not support any changes to the ruffed grouse season or bag limits at this time. We look forward to assisting with an immediate return to science-based forest management practices to prevent total extirpation of ruffed grouse and the extirpation/decline of numerous other species from the state's forests. We believe this is necessary to keep hope alive and ensure abundant wildlife for future generations of Ohioans to enjoy.