

January 27, 2015

Chairman Spraker and Members of the Board of Game:

As the primary advocate for sheep hunters, wild sheep, and their habitat, the Wild Sheep Foundation (WSF) is very interested in Dall's sheep management in Alaska and appreciates the opportunity to provide these recommendations to the Board of Game related to Dall's sheep Management for the upcoming Southcentral/Southwest meeting February 13-20.

Recommendations. Rather than provide comments on specific proposals WSF would like to share the following recommendations. We believe they are consistent with the Board deliberative and measured approach to developing a new management strategy for Dall's sheep management and sheep hunting in Alaska.

Rewrite the Dall's Sheep Management Plans statewide. We strongly suggest that the BOG direct the Division of Wildlife Conservation to review and rewrite all Dall's Sheep Management Plans statewide. Alaska's current plans, created pre-ANILCA and pre-Owsichuk, are almost 40 years old and were written before many of the current biologists were born. The Plans are used inconsistently or not at all and do not consider major changes in the regulatory landscape (e.g. ANILCA and the Owsichuk Decision) over the last several decades. Federal Conservation Units created by ANILCA reduced the statewide huntable sheep population by up to 30% and the Owsichuk Decision eliminated Guiding Concessions on State Lands causing crowding of guided hunters in some areas. A contemporary set of Dall's sheep Management Plans are needed to provide relevant and consistent guidance to wildlife managers and to frame future sheep hunting decisions. This objective should be the first priority of the Department, and the Board should avoid being pressured into making decisions affecting hunter opportunity until the new Management Plans are in place.

These challenges are not unique to Alaska. The Wild Sheep Foundation hosted an international Thinhorn Summit in April 2014 in Richmond, BC attended by wildlife agencies and stakeholders from Alaska, Northwest Territories, Yukon Territory, and British Columbia. Other than preventing disease transmission from domestic stock to wild sheep, the most identified need from state and provincial agency managers and other stakeholders was the need for updated management plans range-wide for thinhorn sheep.

Continue to educate the public on the facts and figures of sheep hunting in Alaska. Encourage ADF&G to continue and expand the efforts to educate the sheep hunting public about ongoing actions and the base facts used in the decision making process. This will help to dispel common misconceptions and eliminate the rampant myths of sheep hunting. We watched at the Hunter Survey Results presentation in Anchorage when the audience applauded the ADF&G portion of the presentation because someone took the time to tell them what the facts were.

These facts and figures should be expanded and made more readily accessible to better serve the public and also to prevent groups and individuals from presenting erroneous, anecdotal, and partial pictures of the situation, (Tell your own story or someone will be happy to tell it for you).

Take No Action on the Current Sheep Hunting Proposals - maintain status quo for one year. The sheep hunting public, the Department, and the Board of Game are best served by not approving any action on the current Dall's sheep proposals. Although some of the proposals may provide short term solutions to current public concerns, they do not have universal acceptance and WSF believes Alaska's Dall's sheep and sheep hunters deserve a well thought out, long-term solution. The basis of a long term solution has to be the revised Sheep Management Plans. Not all of the current and long term issues will be directly solved through the revision of Sheep Management Plans, although the plans will serve to frame their solutions. Some of the more challenging allocation decisions are examples. For this reason WSF recommends the use of a Sheep Hunting Working Group to develop long range and creative solutions to those problems and to help build consensus in conjunction with the revised Management Plans.


The Wild Sheep Foundation is prepared to assist. The Wild Sheep Foundation is prepared to assist with financial, technical and labor resources. We understand the potential for budgetary constraints and the challenges of a relatively short time line. We recently auctioned the Chugach Sheep Tag for \$190K at our national convention with the bulk of those funds coming directly back to the State of Alaska for wildlife management. We will also facilitate the sharing of best practices and creative solutions from across thinhorn country including the Canadian provinces. We stand ready to leverage the talents and corporate reach-back of the Wild Sheep Foundation to assist in the solutions to these challenges.

Conclusion. WSF is sure the BOG understands that these decisions on sheep hunting may be the most important made in a generation. We seek a commitment from the Board and Wildlife Division to undertake the revision of Dall's sheep Management Plans over the next year with a goal to have official documents and a suite of proposals submitted to the Board for approval by the Statewide Board of Game Meeting in 2016. We are confident that maintaining status quo for one year will allow for the development of plans and the development of comprehensive creative solutions to current issues. Continuing to educate the public during this year will help to build consensus and provide for smoother interactions during the public process. WSF is committed to supporting this process in every aspect, including financial, labor, and technical assistance if necessary.

Sincerely,



Gray N. Thornton
President & CEO
Wild Sheep Foundation



Kevin Kehoe
President
Alaska Wild Sheep Foundation