

Division of Wildlife Conservation
Doug Vincent-Lang, Director
Kotzebue Area Office
PO Box 689
Kotzebue, AK 99752-0689



Alaska Department of Fish and Game
Cora Campbell, Commissioner
PO Box 115526
Juneau, AK 99811-5526
www.adfg.alaska.gov

PRESS RELEASE

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**CONTACT: Brandon Saito (907-442-1712) or
Toll Free 800-478-3420 (Alaska Only)**

State Closes Sheep Hunting in Units 23 and 26A Due to Severe Population Decline

Kotzebue – Today, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) issued an emergency order announcement closing sheep hunting in Units 23 and 26(A) due to severe decline in sheep numbers in the contiguous sheep populations of the De Long Mountains, Schwatka Mountains, and state managed lands in Unit 26(A). General season hunts by harvest ticket for residents and nonresidents with full-curl bag limits are closed by this action. Resident registration subsistence permit hunts for any sheep (RS388 and RS389) are closed on August 9, 2014 at 11:59 p.m. Due to the low population status, no harvest of sheep is warranted.

Preliminary 2014 survey results indicate a population decline of 50-75% since 2011. This decline follows on the heels of a 30% decline from 2009-2011. The total number of sheep observed on survey transects in 2014 (n=102 sheep) was 70% lower than the number seen on transects in 2011 (n=330 sheep).

Sheep populations in the western Brooks Range within Units 23 and 26(A) experienced severe winter conditions in 2013-2014. Starvation and loss of protective habitat resulting from ground-fast ice have contributed to increased declines of sheep populations in the De Long Mountains and Schwatka Mountains. Previous declines during 2009–2011, low reproductive potential, and poor lamb production over a multi-year period have significantly reduced the number of sheep in Units 23 and 26(A). Other contributing factors may include predation, disease, range deterioration from when sheep numbers were higher, and large numbers of migratory caribou competing for, and impacting, sheep forage habitat at lower elevations.

Similar sheep season closures applying to federal subsistence hunting have been recommended by federal managers, and at the time of this release are under consideration by the federal program.

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