

FISH & WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: April 20, 2015—Conference Call

Agenda Item: Close bighorn sheep HD 122 due to suspected disease die-off & low sheep numbers

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Final

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 15 minutes

Background

The bighorn sheep in hunting district 122, the Clark Fork Cut-Off herd southwest of the Clark Fork River near Plains, has declined to a point where it is necessary to close it to hunting. In recent years it has gone from 112 sheep in 2012 to 36 in 2014. On April 7, 2015, FWP's survey found only 18 sheep, which is prompting this proposed closure.

This herd was introduced in 1979 and has typically done well, averaging 96 sheep between 1987 and 2012. Their numbers began to dwindle after 2013 and went from 87 to 36 in 2014 and 18 in 2015, the last two years being the lowest in the herd's 33-year history. The reason for the decline can't be determined with certainty, but disease is suspected because of the previous long history of this being a healthy herd, the recent introduction of domestic sheep in bighorn habitat, and the fast population decline typical of disease outbreaks. In the winter 2012-2013 FWP became aware of a group of about 150 domestic sheep that had been brought into bighorn winter range south of Paradise. It is also known that bighorns have been in the same pasture with the domestics. To date no coughing or dead bighorns have been found but the area is not necessarily conducive to such discoveries. A sick bighorn could easily die in the rugged cliffs and not be found.

The biological reason to close the season is based on the rapid population decline. For hunters, however, the recent die-off has also reduced chances of a successful hunt. By closing the season now a hunter would not be able to draw a license in HD 122 and consequently use up preference points and not be allowed to apply for another license for seven years. Hunters who have already applied for HD 122 so far this year would be given the opportunity to apply elsewhere.

Public Involvement Process & Results

There has been little opportunity for public involvement in this issue because the most recent helicopter survey was done on April 7. Brain Solan, president of the Montana Chapter of the Wild Sheep Foundation, was contacted on April 16. Mr. Solan was already aware of the situation and expressed support for the closure.

Alternatives and Analysis

The alternative would be to not close the season. This would further impact a declining population, and hunters who draw licenses would have a low chance of harvesting a sheep. Those applying for a ram license would lose preference points, and be unable to apply for another bighorn sheep license for seven years.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale

FWP recommends that the Commission close HD 122 to bighorn sheep hunting until such time that the population recovers and the season can be reopened.

Proposed Motion

I move that bighorn sheep hunting district 122 be closed to bighorn sheep hunting for the 2015 season and until such time that the population recovers as recommended by FWP.