



MONTANA FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

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Meeting Date: June 25, 2020

Agenda Item: Bighorn Sheep Restoration in the Little Belt Mountains

Action Needed: Endorsement **Time Needed:** 15 minutes

Background: Bighorn sheep were native and historically common in central Montana's Little Belt Mountains but were extirpated early in the 1900s. An initial reintroduction failed in the 1960s, but a few wild sheep began to naturally recolonize the range around 2014. Although the department documented lamb production in the Little Belt Mountains annually since 2015, no more than six bighorn sheep have been verified in the Little Belt Mountains at any one time.

The 2010 Montana Bighorn Sheep Conservation Strategy identified a goal for the department "to establish five new viable and huntable populations over the course of the next 10 years and augment existing populations where appropriate." Specifically, the Little Belt Mountains were identified during the strategy's public scoping process. Both the Maxent habitat suitability model detailed in the strategy and a new Montana bighorn sheep resource selection function model (in peer review) identify extensive, high-quality habitat in the mountain range.

The South Fork Judith River in southeastern Little Belt Mountains (about 65 miles southeast of Great Falls and 80 miles east of Helena) will be analyzed by the department as a release site due to its landownership, historical range, predicted habitat quality and connectivity, distance from known domestic sheep, and winter accessibility. The department proposes to capture up to 50 bighorn sheep (mostly ewes), likely from bighorn sheep HD482 along the Missouri River (north of Winifred) during winter 2020–2021. The bighorn sheep HD 482 Missouri Breaks herd is currently 20 percent over objective. Other sources may also be identified.

Public Involvement Process & Results: This proposal would be analyzed as a reintroduction, rather than an augmentation. Most bighorn sheep habitat in the Little Belt Mountains occurs on Forest Service land and the agency supports further analysis. The department will conduct extensive outreach to the Montana Woolgrowers Association, local landowners, hunting and conservation groups, and other interested parties during the environmental analysis process.

Alternatives and Analysis: Bighorn sheep are unlikely to establish a self-sustaining herd in the Little Belt Mountains without active reintroduction. Another alternative would be to leave the Little Belt Mountains without a bighorn sheep population.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale: The department recommends publicly disclosing and analyzing a potential reintroduction of bighorn sheep to the Little Belt Mountains by conducting an environmental assessment of the proposal and publishing it for public review. Results of this analysis would be provided to the commission late summer-early fall.

Proposed Motion: I move to endorse the department's proposal to conduct an environmental assessment of a bighorn sheep reintroduction to the Little Belt Mountains as presented.