

WILD SHEEP WORKING GROUP MEETING MINUTES
July 20, 2014 - San Antonio, Texas

Chair – Clay Brewer, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department
Director Sponsor – Tony Wasley, Nevada Department of Wildlife

ATTENDEES (30 Total – 12 jurisdictions, BLM and USFS represented):

Approval of previous minutes: The April 29, 2014 WSWG meeting minutes were approved with no changes recommended.

Welcome, Introductions and Roster Update (Brewer)

Review of Agenda and Request for Additions (Brewer): Development of a non-resident harvest allocation table was added to the agenda.

WSWG Membership Changes (Brewer): Alaska is currently vacant

Review of Previous Action Items (Brewer): Three previous action items (all WSWG publications) were presented for discussion:

1. Bighorn Sheep Conservation Challenges and Management Strategies for the 21st Century: The project has been completed and distributed to the Directors at this meeting. Copies have been shipped to the Wild Sheep Foundation and Amber Munig (AZGFD) and Brewer will send copies to the other jurisdictions.
2. History of Wild Sheep Translocations in North American: This project is still in progress. Translocation information for 2013 needs to be added before the project can be finalized.
3. Thinhorn Sheep Conservation Challenges and Management Strategies: Information provided through the 2014 Thinhorn Sheep Summit will be used to develop this publication. A draft has been developed by Becky Schwanke, Troy Hegel and Bill Jex but needs to be expanded.

Tax Valuation for Wildlife (Agricultural Tax Appraisal based on wildlife management): Brewer presented information concerning the Tax Valuation for Wildlife Management program that Texas uses. The program may have implications for land use in other jurisdictions, particularly as it relates to domestic sheep and goats. Brewer invited Kirby Brown (formerly the Private Lands Program Director with TPWD and now with Ducks Unlimited) to lead the discussion. Mr. Brown helped master mind the program which involved worked with various partners to amend the Texas Constitution in 1995. Under the Texas Tax Code, wildlife management is a qualifying agricultural practice that if done to the required degree of intensity, as defined by the statues, regulations and guidelines, qualifies land to be appraised as open-spaced land based on the land's productive value rather than its market value. When a landowner elects to convert the primary use of their land from farming or ranching to wildlife

management there is no change in the amount of property taxes assessed against the property, only a change in the qualifying agricultural practice, therefore, appraisal based on wildlife management use is revenue neutral. Wildlife management is defined by the Texas Tax Code as actively using the land through at least 3 of 7 wildlife management practices (habitat control, erosion control, predator control, providing supplemental water, providing supplemental food, providing shelters, or conducting census counts) to propagate a sustaining breeding, migrating, or winter population of indigenous wild animals for human use, including, food, medicine, or recreation. Land can also qualify for appraisal based on wildlife management use if it is being used to protect a federally listed endangered species under a conservation easement or as part of a qualifying habitat conservation plan. A wildlife management plan is required and must be provided to the appraisal district in which the tract of the land is located. The contents of the wildlife management plan must include: (1) ownership information and a description of the property and its current use; (2) the landowners goals and objectives for the land; (3) the target indigenous wildlife species being managed; (4) the three or more specific wildlife management practices listed in Texas Tax Code (habitat control, erosion control, predator control, providing supplemental water, providing supplemental food, providing shelters, or conducting census counts) to be implemented; and (5) the specific wildlife management activities the landowner will use to implement the wildlife management practices for the benefit of the target indigenous wildlife species. If the tract of land provides habitat for species that are federally listed or a candidate for listing as endangered or threatened under the Endangered Species Act, the wildlife management plan must ensure that no wildlife management practices or activities implemented will harm those species. There are some Minimum acreage requirements which are assigned by county so this may not address the small properties used for DS hobby farms. A question and answer session followed.

Update - March 12, 2014 Meeting at the North American Wildlife Conference: On March 12, 2014, Brewer and other wild sheep stakeholders met with key US Forest Service (USFS) representatives from the Washington Office for the following purposes:

- To discuss the need for separation between bighorn sheep and domestic sheep and goats to determine how committed the USFS is to maintaining separation and how they plan to accomplish it.
- To discuss the need for the USFS to continue west-wide risk assessment and determine how they plan to accomplish the task.
- To emphasize the strong interest and broad support for bighorn sheep by NGOs and many others on USFS lands.
- To emphasize the importance of involving state wildlife agencies throughout these various processes
- To discuss the challenges associated with wild sheep management in wilderness areas.

It was agreed that time would be allocated at the July 20, 2014 WSWG meeting in San Antonio for an update on the above issues, including risk assessments in Region 4 and at the national level. The update was provided by Chris Iverson and Rob Harper. Region 4 risk assessments are currently being performed on a forest by forest basis and should be finished by this fall. Completion of population viability analyses, stakeholder meetings, evaluation of alternatives and final decisions will follow. Upon completion of the process in Region 4, efforts will begin in other regions.

The USFS wants consistency in how they assess predictability of contact. The process involves: gathering and mapping locations, creating the model and risk assessment, distribution of information and working with stakeholders, and final decisions (what is required to ensure spatial separation and alternatives for permittees who are impacted). The USFS has committed to updating maps annually for the west. However, maps have not been updated in 3 years. States should update bighorn sheep current distribution map layers (shapefiles) and send them to Melanie ASAP. Brewer has set up a website where states can access/update the map information. Woolever indicated the need for best available data including: mapping of core areas, total area occupied and definitions concerning how the shape-files were made. Iverson indicated that analysis must be performed at the appropriate scale. Region 4 began assessments in February 2014. Utah is first to do this assessment outside of the Payette. WY, ID and NV will follow. The analysis gives a probability of contact for rams, ewes, herds, and rate of contact. The USFS wants state bighorn sheep biologists to help interpret the data. The USFS is exploring alternatives for displaced permittees (vacant allotments, changes in classes of livestock and others). A database of available allotments is currently being developed. All bighorn sheep populations are not equal, and decisions concerning which ones need to be viable from a state perspective need to be made. The USFS, however, needs to have viable populations in each forest. In Wyoming, bighorn sheep transplants are being opposed by the agriculture community. The biological issue is different than the political issue in many respects. Hurley indicated that over the past 2 months, there have been at least 4 willing sellers that want to convert their domestic sheep allotment or close it, and the USFS has not been willing to support it. The USFS views these opportunities as a business deal between wild sheep organizations and the permittee and not the USFS. Vacant allotments are still suitable for livestock grazing and permits can be reissued. It may make sense to wait until the risk assessment is completed. The models are blind to administrative boundaries (FS, BLM, SITLA, private, etc.). If there is a risk of bighorn sheep on USFS lands moving to a BLM allotment that have domestic sheep, the model will account for it. Discussion concerning the costs of reintroducing a bighorn sheep population if one had to be restored due to a die-off ensued. The WSWG strongly supports these risk assessments. The need for timetables, better communication and the involvement of states in every step of the process was emphasized

Disease Issues

- **Disease workshop:** Last summer the WSWG submitted a request to the Wildlife Health Committee for updating the 2009 herd health monitoring and disease sampling protocol. A workshop comprised of wildlife health professionals was successfully completed last fall. Gillin updated the WSWG on progress and indicated that a draft document has been completed. The document will be finalized soon.
- **Disease Sampling Training:** One of the fallouts from the disease workshop is disease sampling training that is planned for this winter in conjunction with the WSF Convention. The WSWG is working with the Wildlife Health Committee to accomplish. The training will be a “train the trainer.” Representatives will travel to Reno for training and then go back to their respective jurisdictions to pass on the techniques and other information to managers. This will ensure standardized disease sampling west-wide and depending on how it goes, Clay and Chad are exploring similar training opportunities for a wider audience.

- **West-wide adaptive bighorn sheep disease management:** On June 26, several members from the WSWG and WHC met to discuss a potential west-wide collaborative adaptive bighorn disease management project. The project is in the early stages and will most likely explore interventions that would fall into 3 primary conditions: 1) chronic population problems; 2) pathogens have not yet been detected in the herd and herd performance is good; and 3) herds that have been exposed to pathogens and have adequate to good herd performance. Efforts must be measurable and relevant and the results and outcomes must be based on a proper experimental design and must be usable and repeatable over time. Additional information on the topic to follow in the near future.

Project Proposal: Harvest and Trophy Records: Implications for Understanding Factors Affecting Horn and Antler Size in Ungulates: Jim Heffelfinger indicated that the overall goal of this project is to provide a rigorous evaluation of two sources of harvest data to quantify the general relevance of trophy records recorded by conservation organizations, and to document long-term trends in horn size and age of bighorn sheep at a regional level. The primary objectives of the proposed research are to: 1) Determine whether there are temporal trends in size of trophy horn-like structures recorded by the Pope and Young Records Program, and if so, whether those trends align with those observed in the Records of North American Big Game from the Boone and Crockett Club; 2) evaluate potential bias in trophy records recorded by the Pope and Young and Boone and Crockett clubs by comparing them to those documented among harvested sheep recorded by state and provincial agencies; and 3) evaluate temporal trends in horn size and age of bighorn sheep harvested and recorded throughout western North America. A number of jurisdictions agreed to participate as needed and the topic concluded with a question and answer session.

Conservation Auction tags: Brewer lead discussion concerning the importance of funding provided by conservation auction tags for wild sheep and other wildlife management programs. Recently, hunters have gone through various IRS and state audits related to charitable deductions for auction tags and examples were provided. The differences in definitions of fair market value between states were discussed. Development of a standardize list of required items needed for auction tag descriptions might be beneficial for jurisdictions. Brewer suggested seeking input from the WAFWA legal committee. However, a consensus was not reached and no action was taken.

State/Provincial Hot Issues: Jurisdictional reports were presented by members in attendance and Brewer presented reports for those not present.

USFS Update: Melanie Woolever presented information concerning the USFS pack goat plan and discussed the recent Payette court decision. The Payette decision has been appealed and will take up to 2 years to complete. No new information will be presented. A conversation concerning the various letters circulating from the domestic sheep industry ensued.

BLM Update: Sally Butts lead discussion concerning the BLM Policy Manual, ongoing risk assessments which are tied closely to USFS risk assessments and activities associated with the US Sheep Experiment Station Closure.

WSF Update (Hurley):

Disease brochure: Hurley offered to send copies of the brochure to anyone who needed them.

Thinhorn Summit was provided: In April 2014, approximately 70 people attended the first Thinhorn Sheep Summit. Alaska, BC, Yukon and Northwest Territories were represented. The goals of the Summit were to: assemble diverse stakeholders responsible for, dependent on, and interested in THS and to advance the level of communication, cooperation, and commitment of diverse stakeholders, to benefit THS conservation. The objectives were to: identify ecological and human-footprint challenges faced by THS sheep; identify data needs and opportunities to enhance THS sheep distribution, habitats, and populations; identify and prioritize resources needed for THS sheep conservation and management; develop strategies and timetables for obtaining needed resources; and discuss harvest regulations/strategies, resident/non-resident hunting opportunities and harvest allocation. Discussions and interactions over the 2-day summit strengthened collaboration, identified challenges, and provided tangible action items and strategies to enhance conservation of thinhorn sheep. A 35 page summary of the Summit has been completed. The document will assist the WSWG in developing a companion to the recently completed WSWG Bighorn Challenges publication. A synthesis and summary of priority action items identified by jurisdiction and will serve as the initial strategic plan for THS.

Rocky Crate Foundation (Washington State University): Dr. Sri (Chair) has announced his retirement (July 1, 2015) and his successor is currently being recruited.

WSF/Kevin Hurley Scholarship: Information concerning the newly created scholarship program was discussed.

WSF Review of Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Act: Stephanie Adams was contracted to conduct a review of the PR program to ensure that agencies are maximizing use of WSF auction proceeds in leveraging PR funds. A history of the program, list of jurisdictional federal aid coordinators and breakdown of how funds are used/leveraged was discussed. A summary document was provided to the WSWG

Auctions: In an effort to speed up the WSF Convention auction, state representatives will no longer present their auction tags. Jurisdictions will send their videos/photos to the WSF for presentation. Exhibit space will be provided in the auction hall for states to present information to potential bidders (night or day permit is auctioned).

Grant-In-Aid Program: Applications must be submitted electronically (between July 1-August 31).

Development of a non-resident harvest allocation/regulation table: Brewer discussed the table he is currently working on that will be included in the Fall issue of the WSF publication. The table will summarize west-wide non-resident allocation regulations. Information for the following jurisdictions is still needed: Alaska, New Mexico and South Dakota.

Federal Budget Priorities: The need for retaining the 4 USFS/BLM positions that are dedicated to the WSWG was discussed. These include: 2-Bighorn Program Leaders (1-USFS/1BLM) and 2-Bighorn Sheep Biologists (1-USFS/1-BLM). It was agreed that retaining these positions would be recommended to the Directors at the WAFWA business meeting.

Next WSWG Meeting: Teleconference planned for September

Upcoming Meetings

- Wild Sheep Foundation Convention: January 8-11, 2014 Reno, NV (Reno, NV)
 - Disease Sampling Training: January 5, 2014
 - WSWG Meeting: January 6th (1:00-5:00) and 7th (8:00-5:00), 2014
 - Wildlife Professionals meeting: January 7 (1:00-5:00), 2014
- DBC: April 15-17, 2015 Anza Borrego SP, CA

No Other Business – meeting adjourned at 4:45 PM