

Implementation of the Montana Bighorn Sheep Conservation Strategy

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Abstract: Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) recently completed a Conservation Strategy for bighorn sheep which was approved the FWP Commission January, 2010. This is Montana's first comprehensive planning effort for bighorns and includes a thorough discussion of the history of bighorn sheep in Montana including translocation efforts and the role that hunting has played in managing bighorns. Functional implementation is the primary challenge in utilization of any planning document. Implementation of the strategy is focused on monitoring and management of populations, health and habitats. Population monitoring to determine numerical status has been adequate and no major changes are being proposed. Management of populations consists of setting objectives and managing for those objectives through hunting and translocation efforts. Adaptive processes for determining the number of licenses issued for rams and ewes have been developed that provide for harvest levels designed to meet numerical objectives. Establishing 5 new populations over the next 10 years is one of 11 statewide objectives in the strategy and will be facilitated, in part, by a GIS modeling effort to identify suitable habitats. Health monitoring and management will continue with many established efforts such as collecting biological samples from sheep during translocation efforts. New direction to determine health of populations may include genetic sampling looking at genetic status of small/isolated populations determining the need for possible augmentation. Genetic sampling will also be pursued to look at structure and genetic status of metapopulations. Efforts to improve separation of wild sheep and domestic sheep/goats are on-going and will be emphasized to protect new and existing populations from potential disease transmission. Most bighorn sheep habitat in Montana occurs on land managed by the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management and FWP relies on partnerships with these and other land managing agencies and private landowners to effectively manage habitat for bighorns. Monitoring and management of populations, health and habitat are not independent aspects of managing bighorn sheep but must be integrated to maintain viable populations of bighorns. A risk assessment for each population is underway to determine the status of these 3 factors for each population and will help prioritize management actions for bighorn sheep on a statewide basis.

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