

**Meeting Date:** March 20, 2024

**Agenda Item No.** 5D

**Agenda Item:** Hells Canyon Bighorn Sheep Disease Update (**Action**)

**Bureau Chief Approval:** SR

**Prepared by:** Hollie Miyasaki, Wildlife Staff Biologist

**Background:**

The Idaho Fish and Game Commission has authority to establish harvest seasons (including season dates, bag limits, size, sex, and harvestable species) through proclamation. The Commission considers proposed changes for season setting and publishes proclamations biennially for moose, bighorn sheep, and mountain goat in January of odd-numbered years. The Commission set the 2023 and 2024 seasons and tag numbers for moose, bighorn sheep, and mountain goats at their January 2023 meeting.

Although the Department focuses the season-setting process on a biennial cycle, the Commission has the authority to consider proposals and make adjustments annually. These adjustments are often due to fire, severe winter weather, disease, new data, or other factors.

A pneumonia outbreak was detected in bighorn sheep in the North and South Hells Canyon Population Management Units in mid-December 2023 and is ongoing. Potentially affected bighorn sheep populations are located along the Snake River and its tributaries in Idaho, Washington, and Oregon. The bacterium responsible for the pneumonia outbreak is *Mycoplasma ovipneumoniae*, commonly referred to as “Movi.” Exposure of bighorn sheep populations to Movi is usually followed by a die-off. The severity of these die-offs can vary, with population declines ranging from 5% – 100%. On average, about 50% of a population survives the initial die-off. More information is being gathered to understand the severity of the current die-off.

The Department conducted a mark-resight (ground) survey in November 2023 (pre-die-off) and an aerial survey in January 2024 of this area. The two surveys used different techniques (ground mark-resight vs. aerial sightability) during different biological seasons for bighorn sheep (rut vs. winter) and aerial survey conditions were less than ideal for the January 2024 survey, limiting the usefulness of direct comparisons between the specific estimates. However, by all indications there were fewer sheep in January 2024. The breakdown of the 30 total rams observed (raw count) during the January 2024 survey was Class I = 3, Class II = 6, Class III = 12, Class IIIB = 2, and Class IV = 7, for a total of 21 rams Class III or larger.

*Table 1. North Hells Canyon survey estimates from November 2023 mark-resight (ground) survey and January 2024 aerial survey.*

Group	Nov 2023	Jan 2024
Ewes	97	78
Lambs	42	19
Rams	90	33
Total	229	127

Controlled Hunt Area 11 currently has 2 tags available in the controlled hunt drawing. This hunt area is also available to the bighorn sheep lottery tag winner in 2024, possibly adding 1 additional tag to this hunt. The 2022 Bighorn Sheep Management Plan direction is to maintain the availability of mature rams by restricting harvest to no more

than approximately 20% of the Class III and IV rams observed during the most recent survey or the number believed to be present based on other information. During the January 2024 survey, 21 Class III or larger rams were observed, which would support harvest of up to 4 rams under this management direction.

The Department is recommending no change to the 2024 bighorn sheep season, allowing up to 3 tags (including the lottery tag) in Controlled Hunt Area 11 in 2024. Department staff will continue to monitor the effects of the disease outbreak on bighorn sheep populations in Hunt Area 11 and provide the Commission with regular updates and subsequent recommendations if needed.

**Statutory Authority and/or Policy Issues:**

Idaho Code 36-104 grants authority to the Commission to promulgate rules for the taking of wildlife consistent with state policy. Species management plans developed by the Department and adopted by the Commission provide long-term direction for population and harvest management.

**Public Involvement Process:**

Recommendations for the 2023 and 2024 hunting seasons—which were set in January 2023—resulted from year-round public involvement and population and harvest monitoring. Proposals being considered for tag number modifications for the 2024 hunting season were posted via Commission meeting gold sheet on the Department’s website in March to inform the public and provide an opportunity for input.

**Justification:**

Commission action is required to adopt changes to the 2023-2024 hunting seasons that were set by Commission proclamation in January 2023.

**Staff Recommendation:**

No Action. Staff recommends no change to Controlled Hunt No. 5001 (2 tags) or allowance of lottery tag (1) in Controlled Hunt Area 11, which could result in the use of 3 total tags in the hunt area during the 2024 season.