

Meeting Date: July 27, 2023

Agenda Item No. 5E1

Agenda Item: Release of Bighorn Sheep Tags for Auction and Lottery (**Action**)

Bureau Chief Approval: SR

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Background:

Idaho Code 36-408(5)(a) dictates that one special bighorn sheep (BHS) tag shall be auctioned off by an incorporated nonprofit wildlife conservation organization selected by the Commission each year. The Commission is also authorized to issue one special BHS tag to be issued by lottery by the Department or a nonprofit wildlife conservation organization selected by the Commission (Idaho Code 36-408(5)(b)). At Commission direction, the Bureau of Wildlife staff developed guidelines for selection of organizations competing for opportunity to offer wildlife auction and lottery tags. When there are multiple bidders, Wildlife Bureau staff review and score all applications for the auction and lottery tags to assist in selecting which conservation groups receive these special wildlife tags to market through lottery or auction. Only two organizations have applied to offer the BHS auction tag and BHS lottery tags in recent years; *Wild Sheep Foundation* has been selected to receive the auction tag and the opportunity to market the lottery tag has been granted to the *Idaho Wild Sheep Foundation*.

Auction tag -- The auction tag sells for the highest price during odd-numbered years when the tag may be used in Hunt Area 11 in Hells Canyon. The auction tag sold for high values of \$320,000 in 2023, \$310,000 in 2021, \$180,000 in 2005 and \$175,000 in 2019. The winning bid for the tag was \$165,000 in 2020 and 2022 and \$105,000 in 2018, when the tag could not be used in Hunt Area 11. Since 1988, the auction tag has generated \$3,399,500 in gross proceeds for bighorn sheep research and management.

Proceeds received from the auction tag are currently used to identify causes for, and solutions to, disease in BHS. The funds may be used to match other funding sources resulting in a substantial multiplier effect. Auction tag sales proceeds have:

- Funded field investigations that led to discovery of a bacterium that predisposes BHS to pneumonia. This allows tracking of transmission from domestic sheep to BHS and among BHS populations and provides a target for developing treatments or management strategies for diseased populations. This information can also be used to match population health profiles for translocations.
- Provided funding to collect the data now used nationally by federal land management agencies as the basis of a model to quantitatively assess risk of contact between BHS and domestic sheep to make informed decisions about managing grazing allotments.
- Funded development and implementation of population monitoring protocols. This includes ground composition surveys using radio-collared animals and model development to correct for visibility bias in helicopter surveys. This allows managers to better estimate BHS numbers and population trend for season-setting and other management actions.
- Provided funding for the *Movi*-free farm flock project. This project involves working with small domestic sheep and goat producers to clear *Mycoplasma ovipneumoniae* (aka

Movi) from their domestic sheep and goats. *Movi* plays an important role in pneumonia related die-offs of BHS.

- Enabled research and testing of BHS throughout Hells Canyon with targeted removals that helped clear *Movi* from Idaho's Hells Canyon PMU for the first time in over two decades. This population is now healthy and increasing.
- Provided funding for the statewide BHS action plan including the purchase of radio collars, flights, and capture costs.

Lottery tag -- The lottery tag generated \$315,870 in 2022, \$184,420 in 2020 and \$91,191 in 2018 when the tag was valid in Hunt Area 11. During odd-numbered years when the tag was not valid in Hunt Area 11, lottery proceeds were \$172,993 in 2021 and \$107,093 in 2019. The lottery drawing will be held on the last Friday in July and is scheduled for July 28, 2023. Since 1992, the sale of tickets for the lottery tag drawing has generated \$2,103,355 in net proceeds.

Lottery-generated funds are used to support the Department's Wildlife Health and Forensic Lab program, including:

- Disease testing and health assessments for all live BHS that Department staff handle and cause of death determination for all BHS found dead.
- Collection and archiving of statewide BHS disease and health data, including data analysis, interpretation, and support for research and management activities.
- Veterinary and health support for capture operations throughout the state, including creation of capture kits for disease sampling and health assessments.
- Support of collaborative efforts between the Department, research universities, and other entities like the USGS Wildlife Health Center to work on BHS-specific disease issues.
- BHS DNA collection and cataloging of hunter harvest and health assessment samples for population genetics and forensics casework. This has included assisting management and research efforts in providing genetic protocols, procedures, and cataloged genetic samples to research institutions for population level genetic analysis on Idaho's core native BHS herds.
- Funding to support staff to manage the Wildlife Health Forensic Laboratory, as well as collaborative and multi-jurisdictional, inter-agency efforts that involves BHS in Idaho. These efforts have included the Governor's BHS task force, as well as working with our partners at ISDA and other groups throughout Idaho.

Statutory Authority and/or Policy Issues:

The Commission is authorized under Idaho Code 36-408 to release two special bighorn sheep tags; one issued through auction, one through lottery. The Commission also has the authority to select the conservation organization(s) that receive the tags for auction or lottery. A qualification and selection process was implemented in 2010 to assure that these special tags are awarded in an objective fashion. The qualification process also helps conservation groups submit competitive bids in a timely manner.

By Commission Rule, the bighorn sheep auction tag is valid in Hunt Area 11 during odd-numbered years (IDAPA 13.01.04.700.02) and the bighorn sheep lottery tag is valid in Hunt Area 11 during even-numbered years (IDAPA 13.01.04.800.02).

State statute [Idaho Code 36-408(5)(a)] specifies that net proceeds from the sale of the auction tag shall be used for bighorn sheep research and management purposes. Moneys may not be used to transplant bighorn sheep into that portion of southwest Idaho south of the Snake River and west of U.S. Highway 93, nor for litigation or environmental impact statements involving bighorn sheep. No transplants of bighorn sheep accomplished with moneys raised pursuant to this subsection shall occur in any area until hearings are conducted in the area. Further, none of the proceeds generated from the auction of bighorn sheep tags may be used to purchase or acquire private property or federally-managed grazing permits, nor shall any proceeds generated be used for matching funds for the purchase of private property or the retirement or the acquisition of federally-managed grazing permits.

Net proceeds from the sale of tickets for the lottery tag drawing are directed by statute [Idaho Code 36-408(5)(b)] to be utilized by the Department to solve problems between bighorn sheep and domestic sheep, to solve problems between wildlife and domestic animals, or to improve relationships between sportsmen and private landowners.

Public Involvement Process:

Instructions for conservation groups to apply to auction or conduct a lottery for these tags are posted on the Department website year-round. The application period closes 45 days before the July Commission meeting each year (June 12 in 2023). Applications for the opportunity to market the 2024 bighorn sheep tags were received from Idaho Wild Sheep Foundation (lottery tag) and Wild Sheep Foundation (auction tag).

Justification:

Commission action is required to release special bighorn sheep tags to conservation groups for auction and lottery. The competitive bid process assures special tags are issued objectively and that maximum value is received for the tags to implement critical research and management programs.

The Wild Sheep Foundation (formerly the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep [FNAWS]) and Idaho Wild Sheep Foundation (formerly Idaho Chapter FNAWS) have a long history of conservation partnerships with the Department and successful marketing of these special Idaho bighorn sheep tags.

Staff Recommendation:

Staff recommends the Commission award the 2024 bighorn sheep auction tag to the Wild Sheep Foundation and the 2024 bighorn sheep lottery tag to the Idaho Wild Sheep Foundation.

Suggested Motion: That the Commission award the 2024 bighorn sheep auction tag to the Wild Sheep Foundation and the 2024 bighorn sheep lottery tag to the Idaho Wild Sheep Foundation.