



Montana Fish & Wildlife Commission

MINUTES

Montana Fish and Wildlife Teleconference Commission Meeting

FWP Headquarters

1420 East 6th Avenue, Helena, MT

April 20, 2015

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Montana Fish,
Wildlife & Parks

Commission Members Present via phone:

Dan Vermillion, Chairman, Richard Stuker Vice-Chairman,
Richard Kerstein, Matt Tourtlotte and Gary Wolfe

Fish, Wildlife & Parks Staff Present: Jeff Hagener, Director, Ken McDonald, John Vore, Neil Whitney and Bruce Sterling

Guests: No public was present.

Topics of Discussion:

1. Call to Order
2. Bighorn Sheep Hunting District 122 Closure - Final
3. Public Comment – For Issues Not On This Agenda

1. Call to Order and Pledge of Allegiance

Chairman Vermillion called the meeting to order at 8:41 a.m.

2. Bighorn Sheep Hunting District 122 Closure

John Vore, Game Management Bureau Chief explained the bighorn sheep in hunting district (HD)122 has declined and is necessary to close it to hunting. The count has gone from 112 sheep in 2012 to 36 in 2014; on April 7, 2015, FWP's survey found 18 sheep, which is prompting this proposed closure. This herd was introduced in 1979 and has typically done well, averaging 96 sheep between 1987 and 2012. Numbers began to dwindle after 2013 and went from 87 to 36 in 2014 and 18 in 2015, the last two years being the lowest in the herd's 33-year history. The reason for the decline can't be determined, but disease is suspected because this being a healthy herd, the recent introduction of domestic sheep in bighorn habitat, and the fast population decline. Winter 2012-2013, FWP became aware of 150 domestic sheep that had been brought into the bighorn winter range and is known the bighorns have been in the same pasture with the domestics. To date no coughing or dead bighorns have been found but the area is not conducive to such discoveries. For hunters, the recent die-off would reduce chances of a successful hunt, use up preference points and not be allowed to apply for another license for seven years. By closing the season now a hunter would not be able to draw a license in HD122 and hunters who have already applied would be given the opportunity to apply elsewhere. Public involvement has been minimal; press release was sent out and no comments were received; Brian Solan, president of the Montana Chapter of the Wild Sheep Foundation, was contacted April 16 and already aware of the situation and expressed support for the closure.

Commissioner Kerstein asked if there has been new developments that can explain the die-off.

Bruce Sterling, FWP Region 1 Wildlife Biologist stated he strongly believes the reduction is disease related.

Action: Commissioner Wolfe moved and Vice-Chairman Stuker seconded the motion that the bighorn sheep hunting district 122 be closed to bighorn sheep hunting for the 2015 season and until such time that the population recovers as recommended by FWP.

Commissioner Wolfe asked how much time is left for the application period and what happens with hunters who have already sent in their application.

Neil Whitney, FWP License Business Analyst stated the deadline is May 1 but changes can still be made before the drawing; 200 hunters have applied for the ram and 100 for the ewe licenses; will give hunters the option to change their district or give them a refund.

Vice-Chairman Stuker and Sterling discussed the current status and future outlook for the hunting district.

Chairman Vermillion, Vice-Chairman Stuker and Sterling discussed the domestic sheep herd implicated in this HD area.

Chairman Vermillion and Vore discussed how the press release will be worded explaining the closure, and the possibility of the Department meeting with 4-H state officials.

Action on Motion: Motion Passed.

3. Public Comment – For Issues Not On This Agenda

Action: Vice-Chairman Stuker moved and Chairman Vermillion seconded the motion to adjourn the meeting. Motion Passed.

The meeting adjourned at 8:58 a.m.



Dan Vermillion, Chairman

M. Jeff Hagener, Director