

## Ram Harvest Strategies for Western States and Provinces—2007

**Authored by: Wild Sheep Foundation Professional Biologist Meeting Attendees (Biologists from all agencies that hunt wild sheep in the United States and Canada)**

**Abstract:** At the 2007 Professional Wildlife Biologist Meetings held in conjunction with the Western Hunting Exposition in Salt Lake, Utah, a review of the current harvest strategies for wild sheep rams was conducted. A questionnaire, designed to collect data on ram harvest strategies, was distributed to biologists from the 20 jurisdictions hunting sheep in 2007. Results from this questionnaire are presented in this manuscript. Most hunting of bighorn sheep is a function of limited entry drawings, although unlimited entry hunting occurs in much of Alberta and parts of Montana. Draw odds as high as >4000:1 exist for these rare permits. An estimated 1310 bighorn sheep (*Ovis canadensis*) and 1690 thimhorn sheep (*Ovis dalli*) rams were harvested in 2007.

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### Introduction

The evolution of wild sheep hunting in North America has progressed from the market hunting days that pre-date the earliest game protection laws to the current regulations in place by all state and provincial wildlife agencies (jurisdictions). In this manuscript we review the regulations in place during the 2007 hunting season. A questionnaire (Appendix A) was developed and sent to 20 jurisdictions (Appendix B) that hunt wild sheep. The results from that questionnaire were presented at the 2008 Wild Sheep Foundation (WSF) Professional Meeting in Salt Lake City, UT and again at the 2008 Northern Wild Sheep and Goat Council Symposium held in Midvale, UT. An Excel spreadsheet with the data generated by each jurisdiction is included as Appendix C.

Harvest numbers varied substantially among jurisdictions, e.g., New Mexico issues a single public desert bighorn sheep permit compared with thousands of permits in Alaska and more than 900 rams harvested annually. Ram hunts were primarily permitted via a limited entry draw. More rarely, jurisdictions allowed over-the-

counter, unlimited entry hunts. In addition, the results were partitioned between bighorn and thimhorn sheep. In 2007, both Montana and British Columbia were substantially redesigning their respective ram harvest regulations.

### Results

#### Limited Entry Draw Hunts

##### Legal Ram

The majority of jurisdictions have gone to an 'any' ram regulation with neither a horn-curl or age restriction. Exceptions for bighorn sheep are California, Colorado, and Alberta where either 1/2-curl, 3/4-curl, or 4/5-curl restrictions are in place. Montana and South Dakota allow for harvest of either sex during the bighorn season.

In Alaska and Yukon full-curl or 8 years-old restrictions are in place. In Northwest Territory, a 3/4-curl rule is applied.

#### Minimum Population Size

The minimum population size to hunt varied among jurisdictions. The general rule was a population between 50 and 100, although some jurisdictions hunted

subpopulations as small as 25 if linked to a population in a 'protected' area such as National Parks, National Monuments, or military reservations. California requires a minimum female component of 50 ewes prior to hunting.

### **Boone and Crockett Scores**

Most jurisdictions required that ram heads be sealed and Boone and Crockett (B&C) measurements are recorded at that time. Some jurisdictions only measured basal circumferences and horn lengths, i.e., not the quarter circumference measurements for a B&C score. Jurisdictions where thinhorns are harvested did not collect B&C measurements. This is primarily a function of the large number of rams harvested each year. In New Mexico ram age and B&C measurements are closely monitored in populations to allow maximum harvest without inducing long-term declines in either age or B&C scores.

### **Rams/100 Bighorn Sheep**

One measure of ram harvest is the number of rams harvested/100 bighorn sheep in the population. Among jurisdictions this value ranged from 1.3-3.5 rams/100 sheep with a mean of 2.5 rams/100 sheep. The 2 jurisdictions with the highest harvest ratio were Montana and Wyoming at 3.5 rams/100 sheep. The jurisdictions with the lowest ratios were Texas and Arizona at 1.3 and 1.5 rams/100 sheep respectively. For thinhorn sheep the lowest ratio was in the Northwest Territory where 1.2 rams/100 sheep was harvested.

Colorado issues 1 license per 29 bighorn sheep in the population, which translates to 3.4 rams/100 bighorn sheep with 100% hunter success. Monitoring of age and B&C scores has allowed New Mexico Department of Game and Fish to increase the number of permits from

~1.3/100 bighorn sheep to ~2.7/100 bighorn sheep in the Pecos Wilderness.

With an estimated 72,000 bighorn sheep in the United States and Canada, and approximately 1310 rams harvested, the ratio would be 1.8 rams/100 bighorn (Appendix C). This number is substantially lower than the average across all jurisdictions because of a proportion of each jurisdiction's bighorn sheep are in protected areas, i.e., areas that are not hunted. The range of percentages for bighorn sheep in protected areas was <1% in Texas to 78% in California. Making an assumption that 25% of bighorn sheep are in protected areas in Canada and the United States would increase the ratio to 2.4 rams/100 bighorn.

A population estimate in Yukon was not available to create a species-wide estimate for thinhorn sheep. However, using the midpoint population estimates for Alaska, British Columbia, and Northwest Territory resulted in ratios of 1.6, 2.4, and 1.2 rams/100 sheep respectively. Using the 25% in protected areas assumption, the ratios would increase to 2.1, 3.2, and 1.6 rams/100 sheep.

### **Percent of Ram 8+ Years Old at Harvest**

The percent of rams that were 8 years old or older at harvest ranged from 30-73%, with a mean of 51% (Appendix C). The lowest percentages were in Wyoming (28%) and Alberta (41%) and highest in New Mexico (78%) and Texas (64%). It was noted that California bighorn rams (race not state) rarely live to be 8 years old and therefore this may not have been the appropriate cut-off age to delineate 'mature' rams for that race of bighorn.

### **Harvested Rams as a Percent of Total Rams**

There was the greatest amount of 'noise' in this variable. This may be because rams are more difficult to

enumerate during helicopter surveys because of their predilection to move into timbered habitat. The range of values reported were 7-12% of all rams and 20-30% of Class III and Class IV rams (Appendix C). Because most herds are not surveyed just prior to hunts, the denominator in this ratio is inexact. Therefore most jurisdictions base this ratio on estimates generated from multiple sources including ground surveys, hunting guides, and long-term knowledge of the age structure. If ram harvests were based solely on number of rams *observed* during helicopter surveys, harvest ratios would generally be much more conservative.

Between 2000-2008, in the Pecos Wilderness in New Mexico, ram harvest is estimated to be about 7% of total rams using estimates from all sources to construct total rams. However, ram harvest based on rams *observed* during helicopter surveys alone was 21% (range=8-55%). The actual ram numbers were thought to vary little among years in this alpine population that has an asymptotic growth curve. Because rams, particularly large rams, are dominant at constricted winter feeding sites mortality rates for males during winter is hypothesized to be lower and more stable than for subordinate sex and age classes.

### **Number of Rams Harvested**

Within jurisdictions the number of bighorn rams harvested annually ranged from 1-2 in Nebraska to ~200 in Wyoming (Appendix C). Approximately 1310 bighorn sheep rams were harvested in the United States and Canada in 2007.

For thinhorn jurisdictions the annual harvest was ~240 in Northwest Territory, ~250 in Yukon, ~300 in British Columbia, and ~900 in Alaska. Approximately 1690 thinhorn rams were harvested.

### **Success Rates**

Success rates for jurisdictions with bighorn sheep ranged from 44-100% with a mean of 85% (Appendix C). Twelve of 17 jurisdictions with bighorn sheep reported success rates of  $\geq 90\%$ . The lowest success rates were in British Columbia (~65 for non-residents but only about 10% for residents) and Alberta (44%). Colorado reported a relatively low success rate (50%) but 80 archery licenses, which typically have a much lower success rate than rifle licenses, were included. Non-resident thinhorn harvest success averaged 62%, however the success rate for residents were substantially lower, e.g., in Alaska it is ~38%.

### **Over-the-counter Hunts**

Two jurisdictions, Alberta and Montana, offer 'over-the-counter' hunts where unlimited entry can occur to hunt bighorn sheep. Most hunting for bighorn in Alberta is unlimited hunting with a 4/5<sup>th</sup> horn curl restriction. Between 1988 and 2007 there were an average of 144 rams killed in over-the-counter hunts and 25 in limited entry hunts. In a province-wide analysis this equated to 1.5 rams harvested/100 bighorn sheep. Using populations from just the hunted proportion of Alberta bighorn sheep results in 2.9 rams harvested/100 bighorn sheep.

Montana had 4 unlimited entry areas in 2007. Success rates are typically much lower than in draw hunts and Alberta averages just 7.5% and Montana ~6.5%. Montana sets a predetermined quota in these units and the hunting season is terminated when the quota is met, or in some instances approached. In 2005, 43% of hunter numbers were from the 4 unlimited entry units, however just 6% of the statewide harvest came from these units.

**Appendix A.** Questionnaire sent to the 20 jurisdictions that hunt wild sheep in the U.S. and Canada.

**Questions for Ram Harvest Management Strategies**

**A. Goal is trophy harvest (limited entry/draw hunt units):**

1. Are there minimum population sizes/numbers of rams to hold hunts?
2. Hunts based on total population numbers or on total ram numbers?
3. Do you track ram age/B&C scores for herds?
4. What factors affect decisions to reduce permits or cancel hunts?
5. Using a 10-year average, what percentage of rams harvested are mature—8+ years old.
6. What is the mean success rate in these units?
7. On average, how many rams are harvested/100 bighorn sheep?
8. On recent average...how many rams are harvested annually?

**B. Goal is high hunter opportunity (over the counter/open hunt units):**

1. Are there different criteria for these open hunt units vs. draw units?
2. Do you track ram age/B&C scores for herds?
3. What factors affect decisions to reduce permits or cancel hunts?
4. Using a 10-year average, what percentage of rams harvested are mature—8+ years old.
5. What is the mean success rate in these units?
6. On average, how many rams are harvested/100 bighorn sheep?

**Appendix B.** List of 20 jurisdictions that hunt wild sheep in the U.S. and Canada.

Alaska	Alberta	Arizona	British Columbia	California
Colorado	Idaho	Montana	Nebraska	Nevada
New Mexico	North Dakota	NW Territory	Oregon	South Dakota
Texas	Utah	Washington	Wyoming	Yukon

**Appendix C.** Excel spreadsheet with results from questionnaire sent to each jurisdiction.

State	Representative	Ram	Ewe	Jurisdiction--subspecies	Pop. Est. Wild Sheep
Alaska	Becky Kellyhouse	X	x		
Alberta	Jim Allen	X	x	Alberta--RM	11200
Arizona	Brian Wakeling	X		Arizona--DE	4600
British Columbia	Chris Addison	X	x	British Columbia	4100
California	Tom Stephenson	X		California--DE	4400
Colorado	Bruce Watkins	X	x	Colorado--RM	7000
Idaho	Dale Toweill	X		Idaho--RM/CA	4000
Montana	Tom Carlsen	X	x	Montana--RM	6700
Nebraska	Todd Nordeen	X		Nebraska--RM	220
Nevada	Mike Cox	X		Nevada--CA/RM/DE	8800
New Mexico	Eric Rominger	X		New Mexico--RM/DE	1400
North Dakota	Brett Weidmann	X		North Dakota--RM	300
NW Territory	Alasdair Veitch	X	x		
Oregon	Thompson/Torland	X		Oregon--RM/CA	4250
South Dakota	Ted Benzon	X		South Dakota--RM	450
Texas	Calvin Richardson	X		Texas--DE	1200
Utah	Kent Hersey	X		Utah--RM/DE	5500
Washington	Donny Martorello	X		Washington--RM/CA	1600
Wyoming	Kevin Hurley	X		Wyoming--RM	6200
Yukon	Jean Carey	X			
				<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>71920</b>

**Limited Entry Draw Hunt Harvest Data for Bighorn Sheep--Ovis canadensis**

State--subspecies	Minimum Pop Size	Total Pop or Total Rams	Track B&C	No. Rams Harvested
Alberta--RM	f(x) access and pressure	Total rams	age/hl/bc	170
Arizona--DE	~50 animals in population	15-25% of CIII/CIV rams	Yes	90
British Columbia	> 50 in population	<b>work in progress</b>	No	30-50 CA 45 RM
California--DE	50 females	15% CII-CIV	Yes	20
Colorado--RM	~>50; 25 if portion inside protected area	total BHS; 29 bhs/ license*	age/hl/bc	130
Idaho--RM/CA	>40	<b>total rams no. CIII-IV rams</b>	age only	52 RM 13 CA
Montana--RM	~100; <100 in some cases	<b>work in progress</b>	age/hl/bc	150
Nebraska--RM	>50; new herds after 5 yrs	Total rams; 8% CI-CIV	Yes	1--2
Nevada--CA/RM/DE	8% rams; not >50% rams > 6 y.o.	Total rams w/ model	Yes	10 RM 25 CA
New Mexico--RM/DE	licenses--5-9% of total rams	Total rams	Yes	20
North Dakota--RM	<8% total rams; + No. rams >5 y.o.	Total rams	Yes	3--4
Oregon--RM/CA	>35 total in RM	Total rams; 10 in RM; 25 CA	Yes	70 CA 10 RM
South Dakota--RM	>100 and minimum of 4 mature rams	Both	Yes	4
Texas--DE	observed; no more than 10% of total rams	Harvestable rams	Yes	10--12
Utah--RM/DE	12 % of total rams; or 30% CIV rams	Total rams/ CIV rams	Yes	43 DE 20 RM
Washington--RM/CA	~50	? CIII-IV	HL only	38 CA 2 RM
Wyoming--RM	(100bhs); now 1-3/unit (60bhs)**	Both	No	200
<b>Range of 'Values'</b>	<b>50***-100 total pop.; 8-12% of total rams</b>		<b>13 of 17</b>	<b>1-200 Total=1310</b>

\* More licenses issued/100 bighorn because of lower success rate

\*\*Wyoming has recently converted all hunt units to 'any-ram'

**Hunt Harvest Data for Dall's, Stone's, Thinhorn Sheep--Ovis dalli**

State--subspecies	Minimum Pop Size	Total Pop or Total Rams	Track B&C	No. Rams Harvested
Alaska--DA	1+ ram available	varies	age; some B&C	~900
British Columbia--TH	> 50 in population	varies--new rules in works	No	~300 ST ~10 DA
NW Territory-DA			No	~230
Yukon--TH		~27% harvested annually	No	~250

Total=1690

**Limited Entry Draw Hunt Harvest Data for Bighorn Sheep--Ovis canadensis**

State--subspecies	Success Rate	Percent rams 8+	Harvested Rams/100	Bighorn Statewide Population Est.	Percent Protected***
Alberta--RM	44	41	2.9	11200	48
Arizona--DE	95	48	1-2 (1.5)	4600	
British Columbia	Nonresident ~65% Resident varies to10%	26-CA 46-RM	2.1	4100	
California--DE	95-100	~60	2	4400	78
Colorado--RM	41--1990-1997 50--1998-2006**	60	2.1--1987-2006 1.9--1998-2006	7000	15
Idaho--RM/CA	60 RM 81 CA	7.4 RM 7.1 CA	2.0 RM 1.3 CA	4000	5
Montana--RM	95-100	?	3--4	6700	
Nebraska--RM	100	100	1--2	220	50
Nevada--CA/RM/DE	CA-86 RM-90 DE-84	CA-35 RM-43 DE-25	CA-2.5/100 RM-1.9/100 DE-2.4/100	8800	
New Mexico--RM/DE	RM=94 DE=100	RM=73 DE=82	2.2*	1400	46
North Dakota--RM	98	47	2.5	300	
Oregon--RM/CA	95	45% mature 7.14 yr mean	~2	4250	
South Dakota--RM	100	48	2	450	27
Texas--DE	93	64	1	1200	1
Utah--RM/DE	RM=99 DE=97	52	RM=1.7 DE=2.0	5500	
Washington--RM/CA	90	?	2.4	1600	
Wyoming--RM	70-90	25-30	~3.6	6200	10
<b>Mean/Range</b>	<b>41-100</b>	<b>25-82</b>	<b>1.0-3.5</b>	<b>71920</b>	<b>1--78</b>

\*New herds hunted more lightly (<2.0/100) until rams reach oldest age classes

\*\* Includes 80 archery licenses

\*\*\*Proportion of statewide population that is unhunted

**Over the counter bighorn sheep hunts in Alberta/Montana/AK**

	Success	8+	ram/100
<b>Alaska</b>	<b>20 R 65 NR</b>	<b>50-60</b>	<b>2--3</b>
<b>Alberta</b>	<b>7.5</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Montana</b>	<b>6.5</b>	<b>60-70?</b>	<b>2--3</b>

**Hunt Harvest Data for Dall's, Stone's, Thinhorn Sheep--Ovis dalli**

State--subspecies	Success Rate	Percent rams 8+	Harvested Rams/100
Alaska--DA	Resident=38 Nonresident=69	80-90 fullcurl	2--3
British Columbia-TH	Nonresident~65% Resident varies to10%	75-ST 85-DA	2.8
NW Territory-DA	NR=53	ave.=10 y.o	1.2
Yukon--TH	?	79	?