

ALASKA SHEEP HUNTER SURVEY

RC 11

Resident Sheep Hunter Responses

Todd J. Brinkman, PhD

Summary

In recent years, the Alaska Board of Game (BOG) has received an increasing number of proposals from the public to alter the management and regulation of Dall sheep hunting. Most of these proposals reported a decline in the quality of sheep hunts because of increased crowding and conflict between resident hunters, nonresident hunters, and commercial operators (professional guides, transporters, air taxis) providing services to sheep hunters. I was contracted by the Alaska Department of Fish & Game (ADF&G) in January 2014 to collect information for the BOG to use when considering changes to sheep hunting regulations. I conducted focus-group discussions with various interest groups (sheep hunters, commercial operators, ADF&G biologists) to better understand the sheep hunting system and clarify the type and range of issues important to interest groups. Essentially, focus-group discussions helped me design a survey that asked the right questions the right way to meet study objectives. I used a systematic and scientific approach to administer two surveys (sheep hunter, commercial services) that collected information on attitudes and behaviors of sheep hunters and commercial operators related to BOG sheep proposals. Any person that hunted sheep, received a sheep harvest ticket, or applied for a sheep drawing permit during the last 5 years (2009-2013) was eligible to receive a survey. I sent questionnaires to a sufficient sample of people to provide results with acceptable levels of statistical confidence ($\pm 5\%$). To maintain the same statistical confidence for the commercial services survey, I sent questionnaires to all commercial operators providing services to sheep hunters during the last 5 years. The survey questionnaire was designed to answer three questions:

- 1) *Is there a sheep hunting problem?*
- 2) *Why is there a sheep hunting problem?*
- 3) *How might sheep hunting be improved?*

I received a low survey response rate (9%) from people that have not hunted sheep in the last 5 years. Therefore, I focused my analysis on people that have hunted sheep during the last 5 years. I analyzed responses from 698 resident sheep hunters (1,889 sampled = 37% response rate), 70 commercial operators (140 sampled = 50% response rate), and 269 nonresident sheep hunters (522 sampled = 52% response rate). ***This report focused mainly on resident hunter responses.*** Characteristics of resident respondents, such as where they reside or hunt sheep, were relatively representative of a statewide cross-section of sheep hunters. Approximately 74% of resident hunters agreed or strongly agreed that sheep hunter crowding was a problem in either Alaska overall or the mountain range that is most important to them. Resident hunters most strongly agreed that the cause of the problem was related to the influence of commercial operators, nonresident hunters, and fewer legal sheep available for harvest. To reduce sheep hunting pressure and crowding, resident sheep hunters approved of several potential changes to the management and regulation of sheep. The options of potential changes that hunters chose from were identified during focus-group discussions and based on recommendations provided by the BOG. Adding percentages for all resident hunters that approved or strongly approved, these changes included:

- Reduce sheep permit allocation to nonresidents hunting with professional guides (77%)

- Increase sheep tag fees for nonresidents (73%)
- Reduce sheep permit allocation to nonresidents hunting with second-degree kindred residents (64%)
- Prohibit spotting sheep from an aircraft to facilitate sheep hunting during the hunting season (54%)
- Create more drawing hunts for sheep (52%)
- Reduce motorized access in sheep hunting areas (48%)

A strong majority of commercial operators (84%) agreed or strongly agreed that sheep hunter crowding was a problem in either Alaska overall or in the range most important to them. A minority of nonresident survey respondents (35%) agreed that sheep hunter crowding was a problem. Commercial operators (majority of responses were from guides) most strongly agreed that the cause of the crowding problem was related to the influence of transporters and air taxis, guides, and fewer legal rams available for harvest. To reduce sheep hunting pressure and crowding, commercial operators most strongly approved of the following potential changes to the management and regulation of sheep:

- Increase sheep tag fees for resident hunters (74%)
- After harvesting a sheep, a hunter must wait 3 years before sheep hunting again (74%)
- Reduce sheep permit allocation to nonresidents hunting with second-degree kindred residents (63%)
- Increase sheep tag fees for nonresidents (62%)
- Limit hunters to 1 sheep hunting permit every 3 years (60%)
- Prohibit spotting sheep from an aircraft to facilitate sheep hunting during the hunting season (59%)
- Reduce motorized access in sheep hunting areas (53%)

The sheep hunter and commercial operator surveys provided stakeholders with an opportunity to contribute their thoughts to the sheep management process. Results from this survey established a scientific-information baseline for comparison with future statewide evaluations of sheep hunter perceptions. Lastly, findings from this survey will serve as a decision-making resource for the BOG.