
ALASKA BOARD OF GAME

Unit 19C Dall Sheep Working Group

Anchorage, Alaska | June 25 - 26, 2024

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Alaska Wild Sheep Foundation.....PC01



The Alaska Wild Sheep Foundation would like to commend the Alaska Board of Game and the 19C Working Group for undertaking this vital effort. It is obvious that you have assembled a great team backed by some of the best sheep biologists in North America.

Like many of you, we have listened to numerous potential solutions. Some seem crazy while others appear rock solid. I just returned from a major Wild Sheep Foundation conference in Calgary, AB that had representatives from most of the 19 jurisdictions (states, provinces, and territories) in North America represented. Although Dall and Stone sheep have been hit the hardest throughout their ranges by changes in the weather, the challenges that we face in Alaska are not totally unique. I have included some of the thoughts and ideas from that and other conferences and discussions that I have attended. They are not fully vetted ideas nor are they intended to be directive in nature. Simply, they are thoughts and ideas that might be considered as you explore various solutions to the plummeting Dall sheep numbers in 19C and throughout Alaska.

We are pretty sure that the decline in Dall sheep numbers was not due to any hunting issues so hunting restrictions alone won't solve the problem. Our biologists have told us that if we are lucky a full recovery will take 20 years or so. We have also been told that chances are that we cannot do anything to speed up that recovery. Also, that the recovery is not guaranteed. Common sense tells us that we can only do what we can do.

Based on the above it would seem like our mission is to do everything humanly possible to help ensure and guarantee the natural recovery of Dall sheep throughout their range. Conversely anything short of this and we won't be doing our job. We might also just find that there are other valuable things we should be doing on a continuous basis for Dall sheep management.

Here are the ideas that I have gathered and that others have thrust upon me for the consideration of the Working Group.

Collaboration. There are nineteen wild sheep jurisdictions in North America and many of the same problems exist. The technical experts (biologists and project managers) in these areas are more than willing to collaborate, and in some cases already have in the hopes of improving sheep numbers across North America. We should ensure that we coordinate continually with them and consider inviting a few to sit in as part of a good exchange of ideas.

Resourcing. Consider developing your plans as if the resources were not constrained. Some solutions could well take millions of dollars over multiple years. Don't be afraid to challenge the State of Alaska and conservation NGOs like ours with coming up with significant funding to support viable plans.

Consider recommending a dedicated funding source for Dall sheep like a sheep stamp for all hunters. There are possible ways around current constitutional restrictions on dedicated funding.

Don't be afraid to fail. We should not be afraid to fail on specific new solutions. We cannot be risk averse. We could try something new and document our results and if necessary, modify the approach or scrap it altogether. This has been the modus operandi in scientific research forever.

Consider detailed mapping of the sheep range and habitat to include on-ground surveys for food and mineral licks. Clearly defined sheep habitat should be a starting point. Identification of critical winter and other exceptional season habitat reliance. This can probably be contracted out.

The sheep habitat is shrinking as tree and/or brush lines move up in elevation based on climate warming and other factors. Consider controlled burns, logging, or commercial brush clearing in selective areas. Great potential volunteer opportunity and again we could use commercial contractors.

Consider starting a nursery herd in Alaska. This will be a big logistical challenge but it is being done in several other wild sheep jurisdictions. Fence off a mountain, eliminate the predators, ensure adequate food and grow healthy sheep. Sounds simple but we know it is not. Much more common among bighorns but probably feasible for thin horn sheep as well. Would also provide a research herd to check other health issues. Collaborate with U of A and other universities.

Enhance naturally occurring mineral licks – being done in several areas in Canada, especially in Stone sheep areas. Focus is on ewes and lambs and increasing recruitment rate and better winter survival. We know that as a minimum our sheep are low on selenium.

Check vehicle use factors especially helicopters. Responsible development of resources is desired but maybe certain restrictions like minimum heights are required and periods of no-fly in certain zones during specific periods are warranted. Focus is on good collaboration with industry might find conservation partners.

We can't change the weather but there might be some mitigation strategies that we can develop like very targeted supplemental feeding or other more creative ideas.

Intensive predator management would seem warranted until there is a complete recovery. This should not be limited to wolves as they are not the predominant sheep predator in several ranges. Some areas are experimenting with the use of drones to dissuade eagles. Eagles are a problem through wild sheep ranges so others are looking for solutions as well.

These are just a few of the thoughts and ideas that we have received and are presented here for your consideration.

Again, we sincerely appreciate and applaud your efforts. You have the full backing and support of the Alaska Wild Sheep Foundation. If we can assist or support your efforts in any way then we stand ready to do so.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Kevin J. Kehoe". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Kevin J Kehoe, President
Alaska Wild Sheep Foundation

