



## MONTANA FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

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**Meeting Date:** August 20, 2021

**Agenda Item:** Bighorn Sheep Augmentation on Wildhorse Island

**Action Needed:** Proposed

**Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation:** 10 Minutes

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**Background:** The bighorn sheep population on Wildhorse Island was started in 1939 with the release of six bighorn sheep from the Sun River and augmented with two rams from the Ural Tweed herd in 1987. The herd has grown and is a source herd for other bighorn sheep populations. A study of the genetic composition of Montana's bighorn sheep populations revealed limited genetic diversity and some inbreeding within the Wildhorse Island population, although not an immediate concern.

The population objective for Wildhorse Island is 100–120 bighorn sheep. During surveys in 2018 and 2019, about 130–140 were observed. A survey was not completed in 2020, but to reduce the population observed in the 2018 and 2019 surveys to objective levels, 26 bighorn sheep were removed from Wildhorse Island and relocated to the Tendoy Mountains. Surveys subsequent to the translocation detected about 75 bighorn sheep on the island. Reasons for the apparent decline are unknown. Disease sampling conducted during the translocation effort in 2020 detected no pathogens of concern, although mountain lion predation may have influenced the apparent decline. Hunting is not permitted on Wildhorse Island since it lies within the Flathead Reservation boundary.

A translocation of sheep to the Wildhorse Island population may improve numbers and genetic diversity.

**Public Involvement Process and Results:** Public comment will be solicited on this proposal through September 20, 2021. Should the commission endorse the proposal, the department will work closely with Confederated Salish Kootenai Tribes wildlife staff to secure support for this effort.

**Alternatives and Analysis:** An alternative to the proposed translocation is to not move bighorn sheep and monitor the population longer prior to any actions. This would not immediately address population size or genetic diversity. As with any supplemental translocation, movement of animals may introduce respiratory or other disease pathogens to the Wildhorse Island herd. The department would move only bighorn sheep where pathogens of concern were not detected.

**Agency Recommendation and Rationale:** The department recommends the commission endorse augmenting the Wildhorse Island bighorn sheep herd from another Montana population to increase numbers and genetic diversity of the population on Wildhorse Island.

**Proposed Motion:** I move the commission vote to adopt for public comment the plan to augment the Wildhorse Island bighorn sheep population as presented by the department.