**MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS**
**HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION**
**Bighorn Sheep 2025**
**R6 Bighorn Sheep Quota/Range Change**

**Hunting Districts:** 680 & 622

**1. Describe the proposed season / quotas changes and provide a summary of prior history (i.e., prior history of permits, season types, etc.).**

Adjust the HD 680 bighorn sheep either-sex license (680-20) quota range from 10-40 to 1-30 licenses; the 680-30 ewe license quota range from 15-60 licenses to 1-40 licenses; and the 680-31 ewe license quota range from 15-60 licenses to 1-40 licenses. This proposal is also to reduce the 680-30 license quota from 20 licenses to 5 licenses.
Additionally, adjust the bighorn sheep either-sex license (622-20) quota range from 3-30 to 1-20 licenses.

**2. What is the objective of this proposed change? This could be a specific harvest amount or resulting population level or number of game damage complaints, etc.**

The objective of this change is lower the current bighorn sheep quota ranges in HD 680 (either-sex and ewe licenses) and 622 (either-sex licenses) to allow license quotas to be reduced if harvest and survey data indicate a need. The current either-sex and ewe licenses in these districts are at or near the lower limit of the current quota ranges. The proposal would also reduce the 680-30 license quota from 20 to 5 licenses. This quota reduction would reduce expected ewe harvest on this license to 2-3 sheep. The eventual goal of these changes is to help increase sheep numbers to within the population objective.

**3. How will the success of this proposal be measured? This could be annual game or harvest surveys, game damage complaints, etc.**

Success of this proposal will be measured through annual harvest surveys and aerial bighorn sheep surveys.

**4. What is the current population's status in relation to the management objectives? (i.e., state management objectives from management plan if applicable; provide current and prior years of population survey, harvest, or other pertinent information).**

The population objective for these hunting districts are based on the number of sheep observed during aerial surveys. The population objective for HD 680 is to maintain between 405-495 sheep observed. The population objective for HD 622 is to maintain between 175-200 animals observed during surveys. A second objective is to have a ram to ewe ratio of 45 rams:100 ewes with 30% of the rams at least ¾ curl. A third objective is to maintain an average age of harvested rams of 6 ½ years in age.
Bighorn sheep in HD 680 are below the population objective of 405-495 sheep observed. The 2024 aerial survey counted 222 sheep which is 45% below the lower limit of the objective range. The lamb:ewe ratio was 63 lambs:100 ewes. The ram:ewe ratio was 55 rams:100 ewes with 57% of the rams at least ¾ curl. The average age of rams harvested in 2023 was 8.2 years old. Most of the decrease in sheep numbers is due to lower numbers in the eastern subpopulation of sheep. The were 59 sheep counted in eastern subpopulation (LPT 680-31) in 2024. This was 69% below the long-term average for this subpopulation.
We observed 121 total bighorn sheep in HD 622 during the 2024 survey, which is 25% below the long-term average (161 sheep) and 31% below the lower limit of the objective range. We observed 43 lambs:100 ewes, which is slightly below the long-term average (45 lambs:100 ewes). We also observed 85 rams:100 ewes, with rams having a 3/4 curl or greater making up 36% of the total ram observations. The average age of rams harvested in 2023 was 7.3 years old.

**5. Provide information related to any weather/habitat factors, public or private land use or resident and nonresident hunting opportunity that have relevance to this change (i.e., habitat security, hunter access, vegetation surveys, weather index, snow conditions, and temperature / precipitation information).**

These districts experienced extreme multi-year drought conditions in 2021 and 2022, followed by a severe winter in 2022-2023, which resulted in several years of below average lamb production. Recent weather conditions in 2023 and 2024 have been more favorable for bighorn sheep population growth, which is reflected in the above average lamb:ewe ratios seen this year. However, despite improved weather conditions sheep numbers in the eastern subpopulation of HD 680 were still lower in 2024 surveys.

**6. Briefly describe the contacts you have made with individual sportsmen or landowners, public groups or organizations regarding this proposal and indicate their comments (both pro and con).**

We have haven't had opportunity to discuss this specific proposal with the public. There have been contacts made with landowners and sportsmen in these districts and most have indicated observing fewer sheep this past year and most have expressed support for reduction in sheep harvest to help sheep numbers recover.

Submitted by: Scott Hemmer
Date: 09/29/2024

Game – BFW October 23, 2024