

ACR #12 – Limit nonresident sheep hunting in Unit 19C to drawing permit only, with up to 20 permits available.

SUBMITTED BY: Resident Hunters of Alaska

CITE THE REGULATION THAT WILL BE CHANGED IF THIS ACR IS HEARD.

5 AAC 85.055. Hunting seasons and bag limits for Dall sheep

5 AAC 92.057 Special provisions for Dall sheep and mountain goat drawing permit hunts

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM YOU WOULD LIKE THE BOARD TO ADDRESS? STATE IN DETAIL THE NATURE OF THE CURRENT PROBLEM.

Continued sheep population declines in Unit 19C, continued unlimited nonresident sheep hunting opportunity and increasing nonresident harvests.

WHAT SOLUTION DO YOU PREFER?

Limit nonresident sheep hunters in Unit 19C to draw-only permits with a limited allocation of up to 20 permits.

Unit 19C: DSXXX Nonresidents up to 20 permits Aug. 10 – Sept. 20

In the western Alaska range in Unit 19C, nonresident sheep hunters in 2022 took 90% of the ram harvest. Nonresident sheep hunters, most all of whom are guided, have been taking the majority of the sheep harvest there for well over a decade. As the sheep population has declined, nonresident sheep harvest has steadily increased.

Unit 19C Sheep Harvest (ADF&G data)

Year	Nonresident	Resident	Total	%Nonresident
2018	79	39	118	67%
2019	75	39	114	66%
2020	54	14	68	79%
2021	34	6	40	85%
2022	26	3	29	90%

It was announced by a Board of Game member at the October 19, 2022 Dall Sheep Informational Meeting that he intended to submit a board-generated proposal to close Unit 19C to all sheep hunting for five years, due to the declining sheep population and conservation concerns.

We share those conservation concerns. In fact, we've shared those concerns over several board cycles and have proposed to place limits on nonresident sheep hunters in Unit 19C, who have consistently taken the vast majority of the sheep harvest each year. We started out proposing to limit nonresident sheep hunters in Unit 19C to draw only hunts with an allocation of 50 permits. It was denied. As the sheep population continued to decline and nonresident harvests increased, we proposed to limit nonresident sheep hunters to draw only hunts with an allocation of 30 permits. It too was voted down. The board has repeatedly refused to limit nonresident sheep hunters. And now it seems the only two choices the board will consider are to continue to take no action at all,

or place restrictions on everyone, when all along the objective should have been to protect resident sheep hunting opportunities in Unit 19C.

Resident sheep hunters should in no way bear any burden (again) for the board allowing unlimited nonresident sheep hunting to continue unabated when there have been consistent complaints and concerns from residents asking to protect the sheep and **our** sheep hunting opportunities.

We just want to hunt sheep! We're passionate about it! It's a big part of why we live here and deal with the long, cold, dark winters. And what we especially want, and why this is such a big deal and concern; we want to share the incredible experience of being in mountains of Alaska hunting sheep with our kids, grandkids, and future generations of Alaskans! **We want and expect the Alaska Board of Game to protect our resident sheep hunting opportunities, to keep more areas from closing or going to draw-only where the odds of ever drawing a tag are low.**

Over the past two cycles we have seen calls from guides who are alarmed at the steep declines in the sheep population in Unit 19C, asking for a complete sheep hunting closure for all in order to allow the sheep to recover. Guides who have been guiding in 19C and who know that it is the guided nonresident clients taking most all of the sheep. And now a board member is asking for the same closure for everyone.

With all due respect, that really is like a slap in the face to resident sheep hunters who for years have been foretelling this would happen and asking the board to cease unlimited nonresident sheep hunting in the unit so that resident sheep hunting opportunities were prioritized and protected.

At the recent Dall Sheep Informational Meeting, the Division of Wildlife Conservation Deputy Director was asked just how low sheep numbers had to go before the Department would take action using their emergency authority. He didn't know, there was no hard-set number. Which is understandable; the department position is that the full-curl/8-year-old harvest strategy is sustainable under all conditions, even when populations are low, and that hunting is neither the cause of population declines, nor will restricting hunting help the sheep recover faster.

It is posited that for all the legal rams taken in a season, that same number of legal rams are left on the mountain. Some of those rams don't make it through the winter, but many do, and along with the new legal ram cohort are available the next year for harvest. Thus, there is always a "harvestable surplus" of legal rams no matter how low the sheep population gets. Now add in sub-legal harvest – which is increasing with fewer legal rams on the landscape – that is near 9% of the total reported statewide harvest in 2022, and wounding loss/no report, which is conservatively an additional 5% unreported ram mortality. All those cohorts aren't available the next season. This is where "how low is too low?" really becomes a factor in both sheep conservation and providing "reasonable opportunity" for resident sheep hunters to be successful.

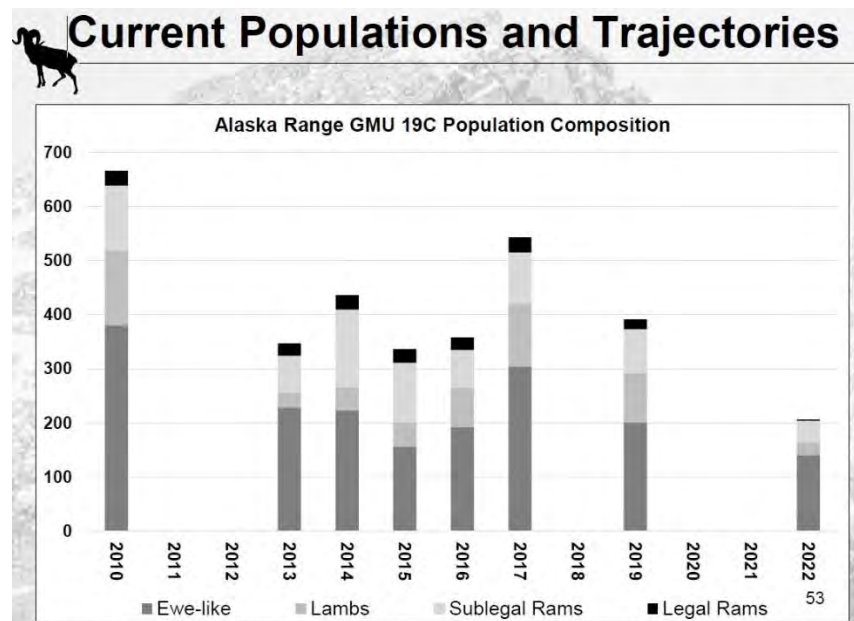
The bottom line is that the board knows sheep populations are in decline, yet still allows unlimited nonresident sheep hunting to the point that nonresident sheep hunters take 90% of the total sheep harvest in a given area. How does that comport with everything the state and the board are supposed to stand for in terms of sustainable wildlife management to benefit Alaskans? And what message does that send?

We got an inkling of what message that sends when just prior to the 2022 sheep season the Federal Subsistence Board (FSB) shut down all sheep hunting on federal lands in portions of the Brooks

Range in Unit 24A and 26B west of the Sagavanirktok River, due to conservation concerns for the sheep population. State regulations in that area allowed unlimited resident and nonresident sheep hunting prior to the closure and will still allow it if/when the area opens up again if the Board of Game does not change anything.

And here is an important point: if the Board of Game does not change regulations in the areas of the Brooks Range just closed by the FSB to sheep hunting, particularly place limits on nonresident sheep hunters, it's highly likely the FSB won't open the area up again to non-federally qualified sheep hunters. It's also likely that if the Board of Game doesn't begin to take actions to limit nonresident sheep hunters elsewhere, that we'll see more federal actions to limit sheep hunters.

Below is a department slide from the presentation recently given to the board showing trend count composition data over the last dozen years from the trend count area in Unit 19C. We can intuit that there were also declines in 2020 and 2021 when trend counts were unable to be flown.



The takeaway we want to point out from this slide is the continued sheep population decline and low lamb recruitment and what it portends for the future.

We can't predict the weather, but we sure do know that the climate in Alaska is changing and that more frequent weather events are having negative effects on sheep. We can predict, as the Department did, that there would be low legal ram numbers in Unit 19C eight years after the bad winters in the early 2010s, as is showing up now, as well as what we're likely looking at in another 6-8 years. It would seem prudent then to proactively manage our sheep with that in mind and start looking at placing limits on sheep hunters with this sequence of priority protections:

1. Subsistence sheep hunting opportunity (the RY20 RS 380 subsistence sheep hunt was closed due to biological concerns, but no restrictions or limits were placed on general sheep hunting opportunities for residents or nonresidents)
2. General season resident sheep hunting opportunity

3. Nonresident sheep hunting opportunity

We urge the board again to develop and institute a framework or policy that has these priorities in place, so that if we should have conservation concerns for any wildlife population, if there is nonresident hunting allowed it is the first component to be addressed with any limits or restrictions. That really does seem common sense that should have been the board policy all along. That would also comport with what the State of Alaska is telling the public and the courts, that we manage our wildlife resources to guarantee that Alaskans will have continued opportunity to hunt and harvest.

STATE IN DETAIL HOW THIS ACR MEETS THE FOLLOWING CRITERIA:

1) To correct an error in regulation.

N/A

2) To correct an effect of a regulation that was unforeseen when a regulation was adopted.

N/A

3) Does the request identify a biological concern for the population or a threat to meeting objectives for the population?

The Department's comments over the last two years identify a biological concern for the sheep population in Unit 19C.

Department comments from 2020 ACR Meeting on ACR 3 , submitted by a guide asking to close 19C to all sheep hunting for two years: *“There may be a biological concern if existing regulations remain in place, although ADF&G does have emergency order authority to close seasons if necessary. The Unit 19C sheep population experienced a large decline in sheep in 2019. It also likely experienced a large decline in 2020, although we were unable to survey this summer. Due to biological concerns, the RY20 winter hunt (RS380) was closed by emergency order. In addition, there was a very poor lamb cohort in 2013 and those sheep would be 8 years old in RY21. Combined, these effects suggest few full curl rams will be available in RY21 and hunting will be poor.”*

Department comments from 2021 ACR Meeting on RHAK ACR 4 , asking to limit nonresident sheep hunters in 19C: *“The Department believes that existing regulations are contributing to a decline in sheep populations in Unit 19C...reports from guides and hunters in the field as well as surveys in other portions of the Alaska Range corroborate a large decline in sheep in unit 19C has taken place. Due to biological concerns the RY20 winter hunt (RS380) was closed by emergency order and in RY21 the RS380 bag limit was restricted to rams only.”*

Comments at the October 19, 2022 Dall Sheep Informational Meeting from a board member stating he would introduce a board-generated proposal to close all sheep hunting in Unit 19C for five years based on conservation concerns.

4) Does the request identify an unforeseen, unexpected event or effect that would otherwise restrict or reduce a reasonable opportunity for customary and traditional wildlife uses, as defined in AS 16.05.258(f)?

Customary and traditional subsistence sheep hunting opportunities in Unit 19C were closed in RY20 and curtailed thereafter over sheep conservation concerns, yet unlimited nonresident sheep hunting.

- 5) Does the request identify an unforeseen, unexpected resource situation where a biologically allowable resource harvest would be precluded by delayed regulatory action and such delay would be significantly burdensome because the resource would be unavailable in the future?**

We are greatly concerned that a continued delay to address severe sheep declines in Unit 19C will lead to sheep hunting closures, it going draw only for all, or an emergency action by the Department shortening seasons or restricting sheep hunting for all, when the hunters taking the vast majority of the sheep harvest each year are nonresident guided hunters.

Continued unlimited nonresident sheep hunting opportunity in Unit 19C needs to be addressed before resident sheep hunting opportunities are limited or restricted. The same is true on the subsistence side when the Department restricts subsistence sheep hunting opportunities because of ongoing sheep conservation concerns in Unit 19C. The current dynamics with the sheep population and unlimited nonresident sheep hunting opportunity is not beneficial to the sheep or any group, including guides and their clients.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF THIS PROBLEM IS NOT SOLVED PRIOR TO THE REGULAR CYCLE?

See above; the unanticipated postponement of in-cycle board meetings due to the pandemic has further pushed this issue to the Region III (Interior Region) 2024 meeting. Continuing to wait until the in-cycle regional meeting to address this issue and take action when conservation concerns are paramount is not in the best interests of our sheep resource.

STATE WHY YOUR ACR IS NOT PREDOMINANTLY ALLOCATIVE.

Any request for an agenda change based on conservation concerns for a wildlife population will naturally have to do with allocation in some way, without being the basis of the request.

IF THIS REQUEST IS ALLOCATIVE, STATE THE NEW INFORMATION THAT COMPELS THE BOARD TO CONSIDER AN ALLOCATIVE PROPOSAL OUTSIDE OF THE REGULAR CYCLE.

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STATE YOUR INVOLVEMENT IN THE ISSUE THAT IS THE SUBJECT OF THIS ACR.

Resident Hunters of Alaska (RHAK) is a hunting conservation organization advocating for sustainable wildlife management policies geared toward a resident hunting priority as outlined in Article 8 of our Alaska constitution.

RHAK wants to ensure that our children and grandchildren have the same hunting opportunities we have today, that more hunts don't close, have shorter seasons, or go to draw-only and take away our general hunting opportunities.

We have been submitting proposals to the Board of Game since 2016 asking to limit nonresident sheep hunters in Unit 19C, over concerns that sheep conservation issues would become paramount and resident hunters would lose general sheep hunting opportunities.

STATE WHETHER THIS ACR HAS BEEN CONSIDERED BEFORE, EITHER AS A PROPOSAL OR AS AN ACR, AND IF SO, DURING WHICH BOARD OF GAME MEETING.

See above, similar ACRs were heard at the 2020 & 2021 ACR meetings. RHAK ACR 4 in 2021 was accepted by the board and became Proposal 267 at the Statewide 2022 meeting, which failed by a 1-6 vote. RHAK proposal 267 was later amended (against our wishes) and brought up for reconsideration to close Unit 19C to all sheep hunting for two years, which failed by a 2-5 vote. Subsequently, the board member who amended and brought up RHAK Proposal 267 for reconsideration to close all sheep hunting in Unit 19C for two years announced that he will be submitting a board-generated proposal to close all sheep hunting in 19C for five years.