



Oregon Wild Sheep Foundation  
5831 SE International Way  
Milwaukie, OR 97222  
[Info@Oregonfnaws.org](mailto:Info@Oregonfnaws.org)  
<https://oregonfnaws.org>

February 8, 2025

**Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Wildfire.**

**RE: SB 769 – Local Cougar Management with ODFW Oversight.**

This letter is to share thoughts from the Oregon Wild Sheep Foundation (OR WSF) related to SB 769 - the local management of cougars with Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) Oversight in Oregon.

OR WSF supports SB 769 because we've seen the impact that unmanaged cougar populations can have on rural communities and other wildlife. OR WSF members value Oregon's cougar population and want it to remain healthy, we also recognize that in some areas, proactive management is needed to protect livestock and to recover our depressed bighorn sheep (BHS), mule deer and elk herds. The bill respects the will of local voters, who can decide if hound hunting is an acceptable practice. By doing so, issues can be addressed before they become costly emergencies.

The purpose of the Oregon Chapter of the Wild Sheep Foundation (OR WSF) is to promote and enhance populations of indigenous wild sheep and rocky mountain goats. OR WSF, along with the Wild Sheep Foundation (WSF) fund initiatives, partnerships and projects throughout the State of Oregon and beyond to accomplish our purpose and mission. We support scientific solutions to resource management challenges, and we invest in disease research, BHS transplants, habitat management, population management, predator management, and conservation education. We want to ensure that BHS populations and their habitats are effectively managed, accessible, utilized and supported by interested stakeholders.

West wide, wild sheep populations are below agency goals in most jurisdictions, due to a variety of factors of which disease (primarily pneumonia), predation, harsh winter conditions, and climate are

Oregon Wild Sheep Foundation  
"Putting Wild Sheep on the Mountain"  
[www.oregonfnaws.org](http://www.oregonfnaws.org)  
<http://www.facebook.com/ORWSF/>

perhaps the most important. Our members, combined with State and Federal Agencies, Tribes and other NGOs, contribute many hours volunteering for wild sheep conservation projects, as well as generously donating critically needed funding to help keep wild sheep from the brink. This funding has been used to support transplants, telemetry studies, research, habitat enhancements (e.g., prescribed burning, water development, noxious weed management), disease surveillance and response strategies, predator management, education and a host of related programs. Trap and transplants conducted west-wide initially brought BHS from Alberta and British Columbia to Oregon resulting in a modern-day wildlife success story.

Yet, BHS remains at risk of local population extirpation across Oregon, and species viability is directly affected by political, public, and private management decisions and actions.

California bighorn sheep were extirpated from Oregon by 1912. In 1954 California bighorns were successfully reintroduced to Hart Mountain National Antelope Refuge (Hart NAR) when 22 sheep were trans-located from Williams Lake, British Columbia. Population growth rates were nominally and consistently positive until the population reached an estimated peak of approximately 600 sheep by 1992. During this period of rapid population growth, Hart NAR served as the primary source herd for California bighorn in Oregon (as well as portions of Idaho and Nevada). Trapping efforts resulted in 673 BHS being removed from Hart NAR for translocation purposes from 1969 – 2003. Additionally, 385 rams were legally harvested during the same period.

However, by 1996 the herd was in decline and by 2004 the population was estimated to be ~300 individuals. During the period of decline, observed lamb ratios indicated the population should be increasing. As a result of these observations, US Fish and Wildlife Services (USFWS) and ODFW initiated a research project to evaluate adult survival and the cause of any mortality from 2004-2008. It turned out that this decline was due primarily to predation by cougars. .

The population has continued to decline to as few as 48 in 2020. Consequently, the herd was at risk of extirpation without prompt management intervention. In response to the decline, the Hart NAR has developed a BHS management plan, and associated actions needed to restore the herd to a sustainable population level. The plan reflects the urgency to implement short-term management actions that are based on the best available science, in combination with mid- to long-term management and monitoring. The plan includes a combination of habitat management and predator control actions. Currently USFWS is funding activities identified in the Hart NAR BHS

Oregon Wild Sheep Foundation  
“Putting Wild Sheep on the Mountain”  
[www.oregonfnaws.org](http://www.oregonfnaws.org)  
<http://www.facebook.com/ORWSF/>

management plan at \$100,000 per year and WSF grants added an additional \$100,000 for cougar control, BHS habitat on the refuge, and population monitoring including \$23,740 for radio collars.


The decline and potential loss of the refuge BHS population poses risks to local ecological balance including predator populations, social welfare of the Poker Jim Ridge Proposed Wilderness Area and to one of the primary source herds used for transplants to available habitat across the state.

Unlike the BHS populations across much of the rest of Eastern Oregon, pneumonia-related disease has not been an issue for BHS on Hart NAR. Cougar predation has been scientifically proven to negatively affect BHS populations on Hart NAR as well as in New Mexico and Arizona. The impact of cougar predation is exacerbated when BHS share range with mule deer because the deer act as a buffer species for cougar. Irrespective of whether the issue is disease or predation retaining a healthy population of BHS in available habitats of Oregon requires active management and the continued commitment of agencies, tribes and conservation organizations.

Pressure on Oregon's BHS will only rise with a growing human footprint across their range, with changes in National, Regional, State, and local wildlife politics, and increasing research and management costs.

Thank you for considering our thoughts.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'K. Martin', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Kevin Martin  
President, OR WSF

Oregon Wild Sheep Foundation  
"Putting Wild Sheep on the Mountain"  
[www.oregonfnaws.org](http://www.oregonfnaws.org)  
<http://www.facebook.com/ORWSF/>