

TO BE UNLIMITED OR NOT, THAT IS THE QUESTION

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Abstract: Montana fills an interesting and somewhat contradictory role in the world of sheep management and sheep hunting opportunity. On the one hand we produce some of the largest Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep in North America in very restrictive limited entry hunting districts. At the same time we provide the most liberal hunting opportunities with our "unlimited" season hunting districts. Montana has 29 limited entry hunting districts and 5 "unlimited" hunting districts. The "unlimited" hunting districts are all located in southwest and southeastern Montana, north and east of Yellowstone National Park.

In our limited entry hunting districts the permits are generally either sex licenses. If successful in the draw, a hunter cannot apply for another Montana sheep license for seven years. All "unlimited" hunting districts have the following in common: unlimited number of hunters can participate, hunters must obtain the license through the drawing, i.e. must choose between obtaining an "unlimited" license or applying for a limited license; the license allows only harvest of a legal ram and; upon successfully harvesting a ram, the hunter cannot apply for a sheep license (limited or "unlimited") for seven years. There are three different versions of unlimited seasons in Montana: 1) runs until the quota of legal rams is harvested, usually 1-3; 2) has a set season length, usually 6 days, with a restrictive legal ram quota, usually 1; and 3) has a set season length, usually 6 days, with no quota on legal ram harvest.

Here, I focus on unlimited Hunting District 301. Changes began to occur in both the hunting district boundary and regulations in 1976, the first year transportation permits were required. Sheep Hunting District 301 was unchanged in boundary, season structure and quota during the 13 year period 1978-1990. From 1978 through 1990, the quota was 5 with two exceptions when the quota was 4, 1984 and 1985. The quota was exceeded 9 years out of this 13 year period and the season length ranged from 4 to 67 days. In 1991, the season changed to a 6 day season with no quota and for the first time hunters had to choose to apply for either a limited entry hunting district or unlimited entry hunting district during the permit application period. In short, Montana fully recognized the importance and significance of the unlimited season hunt relative to restrictive entry trophy sheep management districts.

In the 1990's, the "unlimited" season has become more popular. There was a 28 percent increase in number of hunters comparing the two 7 year periods, 1984-90 and 1991-97. In comparing the same time periods, there was no change in the percent success rate, median age of rams or the percent of rams 6.5 years and older in the harvest, 8.8 percent, 5.5 years and 46 percent, respectively.

Future changes are likely to be driven by hunter numbers and hunter congestion, rather than by a biological problem such as harvest rate or age structure. One is to simply go to limited entry hunts. The other is to try to implement a change which keeps the tone and tenor of the unlimited concept but does limit hunters to receiving a permit during only one out of three years. The pros and cons of these two management options will be discussed.