



THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY ALASKA CHAPTER

2627 Ingra Street
Anchorage, AK 99508

The Alaska Chapter of The Wildlife Society is a professional society founded in 1971. With over 200 members, the Alaska Chapter is one of the largest chapters of The Wildlife Society, an international organization representing wildlife biologists and managers employed by state, federal, and borough resource agencies, academic institutions, non-governmental conservation organizations, and private industry. Our mission is to enhance the ability of wildlife professionals to conserve biological diversity, sustain productivity, and ensure responsible use of wildlife resources in Alaska for the benefit of society.

10 May 2013

Mr. Geoffrey L. Haskett, Regional Director
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
1011 E. Tudor Road
Anchorage, AK 99503

Dear Director Haskett:

The Alaska Chapter of The Wildlife Society recently adopted a position statement regarding the risk of disease transmission from domestic livestock to Alaska's Dall's sheep and mountain goat populations. I would like to summarize our position and offer our recommendations for actions that federal and state resource management agencies, as well as private individuals can undertake to reduce the risk.

Elsewhere in North America, wild sheep populations have been severely reduced following introduction of domestic livestock pathogens, such as *Pasturella* bacteria that cause pneumonia. Disease introduction has mainly occurred when wild sheep have come into contact with domestic sheep and goats, which can carry a variety of pathogens without apparent illness. Treatment of livestock diseases in wild sheep is difficult and typically requires culling of sick animals or entire populations.

Alaska's wild sheep and goat populations have thus far not been exposed to most livestock pathogens. Introduced pathogens could spread rapidly among Dall's sheep in particular because the animals are immunologically naïve and often occur across large areas of contiguous habitat where there are few barriers to disease transmission. We know less about the potential for the spread of domestic livestock diseases among mountain goats. But, we do know they are susceptible to many of the same pathogens as wild sheep. Musk ox may also be at risk because they are genetically related to mountain goats and Dall's sheep.

Although grazing of domestic sheep is still relatively rare in Alaska, use of domestic goats as pack animals appears to be increasing among backpackers and hunters. Domestic goats harbor many of the pathogens that have resulted in population declines among bighorn sheep in the United States and Canada. Use of domestic goats as pack animals could result in the transport of infected animals into Dall's sheep and mountain goat habitat. Pathogens introduced by even a small number of infected animals could have severe consequences for wild sheep and goat populations in Alaska.

There is uncertainty regarding the potential for llamas and alpacas (camelids) to transmit livestock disease to wild sheep and goats. However, camelids can carry some of the same pathogens as domestic sheep and goats. Therefore, there is a reasonable basis for concern regarding use of llamas and alpacas as pack animals in Dall's sheep and mountain goat habitats. Please note that we have no concerns regarding the use of horses, mules, or dogs as pack animals as there is no evidence that they transmit pathogens to wild sheep or goats.

To ensure that Alaska's wild populations of Dall's sheep and mountain goats are not severely impacted by the introduction of livestock diseases, our organization recommends that federal and state resource managers form an interagency working group that would assess the risk for disease introduction to wild sheep and goat populations, develop proactive strategies to reduce that risk, and raise awareness of the issue among the public. Because it is important to consider the views of livestock owners, hunters, and recreational users on this issue, their representatives should be included in the working group. Among the actions the working group may wish to consider are:

- Regulating the use of domestic goats and sheep as pack animals in Dall's sheep and mountain goat habitat on federal and state lands. The Alaska Board of Game recently prohibited the use of domestic sheep and goats as pack animals for sport hunting of Dall's sheep, mountain goats, and musk ox. We deeply appreciate that action. However, harvest regulations do not address the risk posed by use of pack goats outside of hunting seasons, as in the case of recreational hiking. Educational programs are needed to address this risk, and if necessary, regulatory oversight should be considered.
- Establishing a program that certifies llamas and alpacas are disease-free before they are allowed to enter Dall's sheep and mountain goat habitat on federal and state lands. Although llamas and alpacas that are imported into Alaska must be inspected for diseases that can be passed to other livestock, there is no inspection required for *Pasturella* and other pathogens that can be spread to wild sheep and goats. No health inspection is required for the sale of camelids within Alaska. We recommend that the working group examine means to establish a disease-free certification program for llamas and alpacas in Alaska.
- Formulate action plans that serve to control the spread of domestic pathogens in wild sheep and goat populations should an outbreak occur.

Dall's sheep and mountain goats are cherished by Alaska's residents and visitors alike. These wild populations provide sport harvest and wildlife viewing opportunities that contribute millions of dollars to the state economy. They are also important as a subsistence resource in rural areas. The potential for livestock disease introduction to wild sheep and goats is a problem faced by all resource managers in Alaska. A pathogen introduced to wild sheep or goats on state or private land would likely spread to federal land, and vice-versa. This is an interagency dilemma that can only be addressed if agencies and private groups work cooperatively. Our organization is willing to assist in these efforts.

I appreciate your consideration of this issue. I have included a copy our position statement to provide additional background on the problem. Please feel free to contact me if you have questions or wish to further discuss proactive strategies to reduce the disease risk to Dall's sheep and mountain goat populations.

Sincerely,



Jerry Hupp
President, Alaska Chapter of The Wildlife Society
twsalaska@gmail.com

Copies to: Refuge Manager, Arctic National Wildlife Refuge
Refuge Manager, Kenai National Wildlife Refuge
Refuge Manager, Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge
Refuge Manager, Tetlin National Wildlife Refuge