

ACR #9 – Modify the resident and nonresident hunt structure for sheep in Unit 19C.

SUBMITTED BY: Resident Hunters of Alaska

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

Alaska Administrative Code Number 5 AAC: 85.055. Hunting seasons and bag limits for Dall sheep.

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

Unit 19C Sheep Conservation Concerns

Continued Unit 19C Resident General Sheep Hunting Opportunity

Unit 19C Nonresident Sheep Hunting Opportunity after the Closure Period

(Note: we apologize for the length of this section below, but it is important that newer board members have the facts as to past board actions that led to the point we are at now)

At the November 10, 2022, Agenda Change Request (ACR) meeting, the board took up ACR 12 submitted by Resident Hunters of Alaska (RHAK) that asked to consider limiting nonresident sheep hunters in Unit 19C out of cycle based on sheep conservation concerns.

The board voted unanimously to *not* accept RHAK ACR 12, saying it *did not meet the criteria for acceptance because there were no conservation concerns for Dall sheep in Unit 19C*.

Minutes later, at the very same meeting, the board voted 6-1 to create a board-generated proposal that would close Unit 19C to all sheep hunting for five years, stating that *there were valid conservation concerns for the sheep population*. That proposal would become Proposal 204 to be heard out of cycle at the 2023 Southcentral meeting in Soldotna.

This overt manipulation of the public process – the board on one hand telling RHAK that our ACR did not meet the criteria for acceptance because there were no sheep conservation concerns, while on the other generating their own proposal based on sheep conservation concerns – should not have been allowed to happen and was carried out so that there would only be one out-of-cycle 19C sheep proposal (the board's) before the board at the 2023 Southcentral meeting.

Board-generated Proposal 204 was deliberated at the 2023 Southcentral meeting. The board amended the proposal to exempt resident sheep hunters from the 19C closure. A resident closure or any new limits on resident sheep hunters was deemed not necessary. The proposal then passed to close Unit 19C to nonresident sheep hunters for five years.

There were a lot of questions and backlash after the board closed Unit 19C to nonresident sheep hunting. The board decided to create a new Sheep Working Group (SWG) that would focus solely

on Unit 19C sheep management concerns and provide recommendations to the board at a future date.

The 19C SWG was formed in late 2023, with six public members and three board members. A facilitator was hired, and the group was to hold meetings in 2024.

2024 was also the year for the in-cycle Interior Region III board meeting, which includes Unit 19C. There were several public proposals before the board regarding Unit 19C sheep hunting, to include reversing the nonresident closure, as well as Proposal 82, from RHAK, asking to reopen Unit 19C sheep hunting for nonresidents, but limit nonresident sheep hunters in 19C to draw-only permits with a limited allocation.

All the 19C sheep proposals before the board at the 2024 Region III meeting were submitted on time by the May 1, 2023, deadline, nearly a year before the board would hear them. But the board deferred all the in-cycle 19C sheep proposals another year out to the 2025 Statewide meeting, stating that they did not want to make any decisions on Unit 19C sheep until after the SWG recommendations were submitted. They would take all the deferred proposals up along with the SWG recommendations at the same time.

That action amounted to more circumvention of the public process and smacks of favoritism to the 19C SWG recommendations that can only come before the board via an ACR from the group, due by the November 1, 2024, deadline.

The 19C SWG met in mid-October 2024 to finalize recommendations to the board. Six members of the nine-member group supported an ACR asking the board to include resident sheep hunters in the 19C sheep hunting closure during the 2025 season, make all sheep hunting in Unit 19C during the 2026 and 2027 seasons draw-only hunts (with 80 percent of the permits going to residents and 20 percent to nonresidents), and if the Guide Concession Program to limit guides in 19C was not in place by 2028, then the SWG would meet again to discuss other recommendations.

Based on the information coming out of the 19C SWG, that they will submit an ACR that is in effect a new Unit 19C sheep management allocation plan, and the board's seeming willingness to accept it and hear it out-of-cycle at the 2025 Statewide meeting with all the deferred public proposals, RHAK is submitting this ACR to the board (that includes new data) for the same type of management allocation plan consideration.

WHAT SOLUTION DO YOU PREFER?

ACR SUMMARY – 19C SHEEP MANAGEMENT

Resident sheep hunting opportunity in Unit 19C remains open under a general season. Continued general resident sheep hunting opportunity August 10 – September 20 does not pose a conservation concern for sheep in Unit 19C at this time.

Nonresident sheep hunting in Unit 19C remains closed until such a time that a draw permit system is in place to limit nonresident sheep hunters. The season then remains the same, August 10 – September 20. The board should set a conservative “up-to” number of permits and give the

Department the authority to determine the number of permits allocated, with the intention that nonresident sheep hunters and their guides don't overwhelm the area and continue to cause conflicts in the field.

Alternatively, if a Unit 19C Guide Concession Program to limit the number of guides and their sheep-hunting clients in the unit is implemented, nonresident sheep hunting can again be allowed, but it should also be under a draw permit system with a limited allocation (*any nonresident draw permits would essentially go to the guided hunter booking with the guide with an exclusive concession*).

Should there come a time when the sheep population in Unit 19C further declines and it is determined that resident sheep hunters need to be limited under a draw permit system along with nonresidents, **the allocation of permits shall be a 90/10 split as in other areas where both resident and nonresident sheep hunters are on a draw permit system: 90 percent to residents, and 10 percent to nonresidents.** Nonresident second-degree-of-kindred (2DK) permits shall be placed in the nonresident pool of tags.

STATE IN DETAIL HOW THIS ACR MEETS THE FOLLOWING CRITERIA:

- 1) To correct an error in regulation.**

N/A

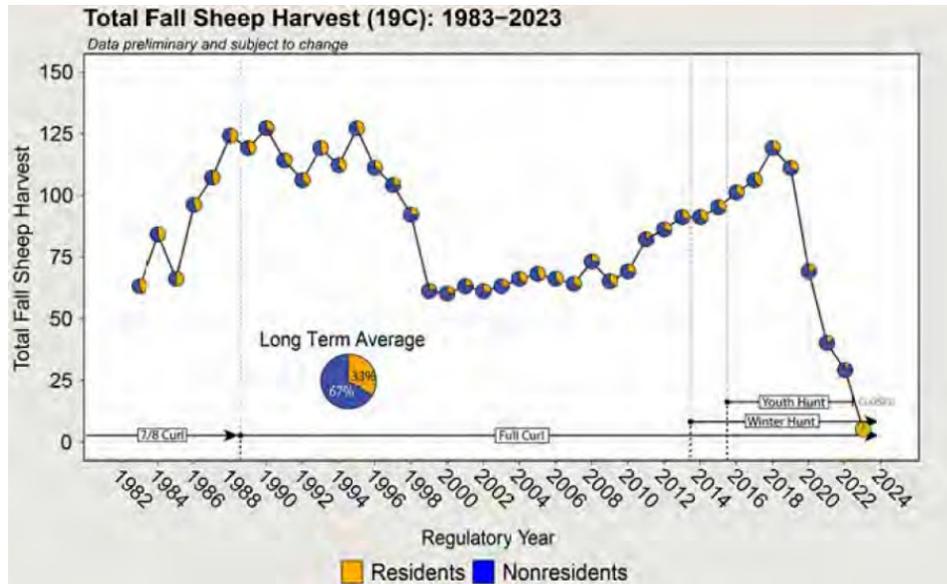
- 2) To correct an effect of a regulation that was unforeseen when a regulation was adopted.**

N/A

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

The board has identified a conservation concern for Dall sheep in Unit 19C if continued unlimited nonresident sheep hunting is allowed and used that as justification for closing nonresident sheep hunting for five years (2023-2027).

In the ADF&G chart below, you can see that 19C sheep harvests started to drop dramatically in 2019, which correlated with the observed sheep population decline from the Department's aerial trend count surveys:



Nonresident sheep hunters have always taken the majority of the sheep harvest in Unit 19C, but as the ADF&G chart below shows, the percentage of nonresident sheep harvests increased dramatically as the sheep population declined:

Contemporary Trends (2013-2022)

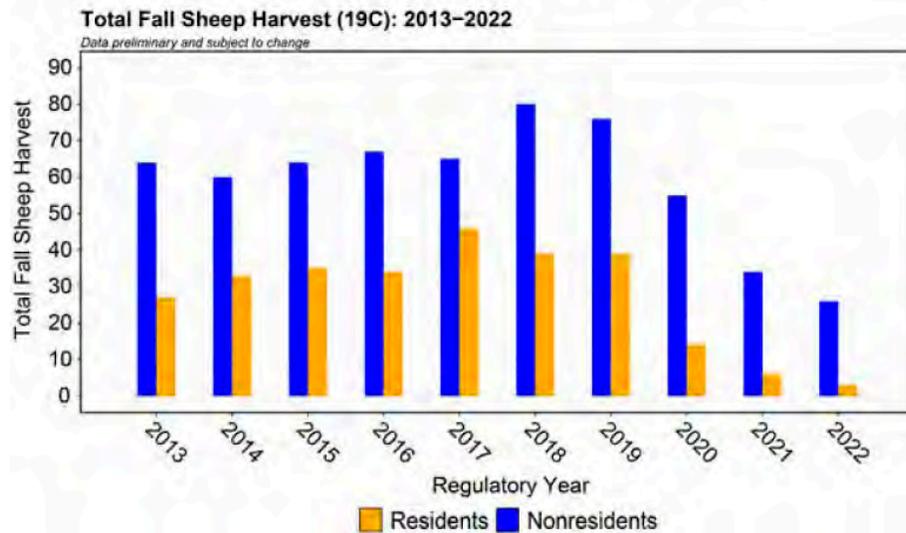


Figure 3. Total annual sheep harvested during the fall general season (GS000) from RY13 to RY22. Color indicates total fall resident (orange) and nonresident (blue) sheep harvested each year.

In 2022, the last year nonresident sheep hunting was allowed, nonresident sheep hunters took 26 sheep (90% of the harvest), while residents took three sheep.

The board decision to exempt resident sheep hunters from their own closure request at the 2023 Southcentral meeting was based on the rationale that resident sheep hunters were not

a part of the problem. Clearly there was a harvestable surplus of rams in the unit for a general resident sheep season, while also maintaining the resident winter subsistence sheep hunt.

In the subsequent two seasons where only resident sheep hunting was allowed in Unit 19C, the resident participation and harvest was:

Year	Unit	Resident Hunters	Sheep Harvested
2023	19C	49	5
2024	19C	~40	10 (<i>preliminary ADF&G data</i>)

It is not expected that the number of resident hunters, or resident sheep harvests, will dramatically increase while the area is closed to nonresidents.

The 2024 aerial trend count survey below showed a bit of good news, with a higher number of total sheep from the previous year and higher lamb recruitment, but of course we don't know what mother nature will bring this winter, and we won't know until next year how many of those lambs made it through their first year.

ADF&G Chart

Table 1. Cumulative 19C Aerial Survey Data

	2010	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2019	2023	2024
Approx. Area (mi2)	453	453	453	453	453	453	453	453	453
Total Rams	348	268	374	301	255	343	202	98	101
Legal Rams	56	60	55	46	53	60	33	13	16
Sublegal Rams	292	208	319	255	202	283	169	85	89
"Ewes"	864	490	639	499	593	697	390	242	247
Lambs	287	94	168	167	195	266	178	73	120
Lambs:100 "Ewes"	33	19	26	33	33	38	46	30	49
Rams:100 "Ewes"	40	55	59	60	43	49	52	40	41
Legal Rams:100 "Ewes"	6	12	9	9	9	9	8	5	7
Sublegal Rams:100 "Ewes"	34	42	50	51	34	41	43	35	36
% Lambs	19	11	14	17	19	20	23	18	25
% Rams	23	31	32	31	24	26	26	24	21
% Legal Rams	4	7	5	5	5	5	4	3	3
% Sublegal Rams	19	24	27	26	19	22	22	21	19
Total Sheep	1499	852	1181	967	1043	1306	770	413	473

- 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)?

N/A

- 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?

Yes, there is currently a harvestable surplus of sheep in Unit 19C for resident sheep hunters under a general season opportunity. But the board may be considering eliminating, or

limiting, resident sheep hunting opportunity in Unit 19C out of cycle in 2025. There are currently no deferred Unit 19C proposals before the board that ask to eliminate resident sheep hunting opportunity.

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

The “Regular Cycle” public process has been circumvented by the board. On top of that, the newer 3-year cycle just makes this all worse in terms of making any needed changes between regional meetings.

The board has chosen to form a 19C Sheep Working group, decide the makeup of that group, and then take recommendations from that group regarding 19C sheep management and allocations via an ACR. Based on that, and even though resident sheep hunting in Unit 19C is currently allowed, we believe that resident sheep hunting opportunity may be limited or shut down altogether before the next Region III cycle.

STATE WHY YOUR ACR IS NOT PREDOMINANTLY ALLOCATIVE.

N/A

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

This request is indeed allocative, in the sense that it wants to ensure resident sheep hunters in Unit 19C don't lose opportunity and asks to limit nonresident sheep hunters to draw-only permits. RHAK has conservation concerns for the 19C sheep population if unlimited nonresident sheep hunting is again allowed. But we don't believe continued resident general sheep hunting opportunity poses a sheep conservation concern. Resident sheep hunters do not need to be denied opportunity, nor do they need to go on a draw permit system. We would like the board to consider our ACR in the same vein as they do the ACR from the 19C SWG, which is also allocative.

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

Alaska Hunting Conservation Organization

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 our comments above on ACRs RHAK has submitted in the past regarding Unit 19C sheep issues. RHAK currently has a deferred proposal (#82) about 19C sheep issues that will be heard at the 2025 Statewide meeting. That proposal was submitted on time, prior to the May 1st, 2023, deadline, a year and a half ago, after consultation with ADF&G biologists and speaking to hunters and guides in Unit 19C.

Since that time, of course new information is available that is not included in our deferred proposal that was submitted on time. But the only avenue the board gives us to submit a new proposal with new information is via an ACR.