

BIGHORN SHEEP PROPOSED RULE CHANGES SUMMARY

Date of update: 6/10/2026

**The Department remains actively engaged in reviewing biological data and considering public input as the rule development process progresses. Please check back regularly for updates and additional information as decisions are finalized.*

BIGHORN SHEEP BIOLOGY

Bighorn sheep population growth is driven by both adult female and lamb annual survival. Because bighorn sheep populations in New Mexico are relatively small, the Department predominantly prescribes a conservative male-only harvest regime. The aim of this strategy is to maintain a huntable number of older age class males while not affecting overall reproduction and population productivity. In cases where bighorn populations are large enough to be limited by winter range or where limiting dispersal behavior is desirable (i.e., high risk of unwanted disease transmission), the Department prescribes a conservative ewe harvest to maintain populations at appropriate levels. Bighorn sheep biology and the Department's harvest strategy result in hunting demand annually exceeding tag availability, therefore ram hunting opportunities are limited, and a "once-in-a-lifetime" random tag distribution system is administered. Bighorn populations are monitored annually, and hunting opportunities are based upon a suite of data gathered throughout the year.

For more information on bighorn biology and management in New Mexico, see this report:

<https://wildlife.dgf.nm.gov/download/new-mexico-bighorn-sheep-management/?wpdmdl=51880&refresh=699f5145ed4dd1772048709>

PROPOSED CHANGES TO BIGHORN SHEEP HUNTING

- 1) The Department reestablished a population of Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep in the Manzano mountains (Game Management Units [GMUs] 14 and 18) in the late 1970s. GMUs 14 and 18 have been included in the Bighorn Rule in the past however, new GPS collar data indicates this population primarily occupies private property year-round. To provide a mechanism for authorizing Rocky Mountain bighorn hunting in GMUs 14 and 18, the Department recommends adding these units as "open GMUs or areas" under the private land provisions of the rule. This change would allow for private land hunting opportunities, with dates jointly established for license years 2027-2028 through 2030-2031. The Department has a hunting agreement where 50% of the licenses would be allocated through the public draw and 50% would be provided to the participating landowner.
 - The Department will establish two hunt periods for the Manzanos: October 1-15 (Period 1) and October 16-30 (Period 2). We anticipate the first hunt being in 2027. The first hunter on the Manzanos will be a public draw hunter.
 - The Department will increase the bag limit for Rocky Mountain ram tags to better reflect bighorn abundance across a greater number GMUs, including the Manzanos.
- 2) The Department reestablished a population of desert bighorn sheep in the Sacramento mountains (GMU 34) in 2018. The initial reintroduction and subsequent translocations have resulted in older age class rams available for harvest. The Department will open GMU 34 with one hunt period: December 1-15..
- 3) In response to public comments, the Department will shift the hunt periods for the Little Hatchets and Big Hatchets desert bighorn hunts from September and October, to December.
 - Both hunt areas would have two concurrent hunt periods from December 1-15 and December 16-30.
- 4) The Department will make adjustments to season dates in some areas. For example, if a hunt normally starts on a Saturday, this date shift would be maintained throughout the rule so the hunts continue to start on Saturday or adjusting to calendar starts for consistency.
- 5) Require the purchase of a license at least one day prior to hunting.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

The Department continues to receive public comment. If you would like to comment on the proposals, please send an email to: DGF-Bighorn-Rule@dgf.nm.gov