The Little Belt Mountains Wild Sheep Restoration Effort

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Montana's Bighorn Sheep Conservation Strategy, published in 2010, calls for Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (MFWP) to establish "new viable and huntable populations [of bighorn Sheep". In 2020, MFWP began one of the first restoration efforts in over 20 years in the Little Belt Mountains of central Montana in partnership with numerous organizations, local landowners, the Wild Sheep Foundation, and the Montana Woolgrower's Association. In Decembers 2020 and 2021, FWP captured 49 and 33 bighorn sheep, respectively (8 rams, 74 ewes), from the Missouri River Breaks sheep herd and released them in the eastern Little Belts. All 82 sheep were fitted with GPS collars to collect locations every 13 hours, while providing mortality notifications as well as a geo-fence to help detect comingling with domestic sheep. With extensive monitoring, we documented lamb production in 2021 and 2022. During the first year, we documented 20 mortalities (15 caused by mountain lion) and between the second release and April 2022, an additional 7 ewes were killed by mountain lions—most from the second (or newer), 'naïve' cohort. In spring 2022, we documented several sheep sick with or that had died from pneumonia. Having collars on all adult animals in the population provided a unique opportunity to monitor and track the outbreak and mortalities as they occurred. Sixteen sheep succumbed to pneumonia or predation (while symptomatic) since April 2022, along with 16 other (mostly predation) mortalities. However, observations of previously sick animals suggest some may have recovered. To date, 13 collared sheep (including one ram) and at least eight uncollared sheep (lambs born in 2021, 2022, and 2023) are still alive. We will continue to monitor surviving sheep for symptoms and determine next steps in the coming year.