

Disease killing off Nevada bighorn sheep

By Jeff DeLong, Reno Gazette-Journal

An estimated 90 percent of a bighorn sheep herd in the East Humboldt and Ruby Mountain ranges died during a catastrophic pneumonia event during the winter of 2009-10. The bighorns, introduced in 1992, numbered 180 animals in 2009.

About 110 bighorns were believed to have died from disease in the Hays Canyon Range in 2008. The herd was introduced to the mountain chain about 50 miles northwest of Gerlach in 1989.

About 100 bighorns, a third of the herd, died from pneumonia in the Santa Rosa Mountains in 2004. Bighorns were first introduced there in 1978 and numbered about 300 by 2003.

Disease might decimate a herd of bighorn sheep that Nevada biologists previously thought faced a promising future.

California bighorn sheep are dying of pneumonia in the Snowstorm Mountains about 30 miles northeast of Winnemucca. It's unknown exactly how many have succumbed in what is a rare summertime die-off, but things don't look good, said Ken Gray, an Elko-based supervisory game biologist with the Nevada Department of Wildlife.

"We could be down to 50 percent of the population already," Gray said. "It's a real serious situation. We think we're going to lose 80 to 90 percent, maybe even 100 percent of that herd."

The news is particularly bad, Gray said, because the herd's future looked so encouraging.

"It was one of those herds that was really starting to take off," Gray said. "We had huge confidence this herd was going

to be one of our best.”

Before the arrival of European settlers and disease-carrying domestic sheep in the West, three species of bighorns – California, Rocky Mountain and Desert – thrived across the mountains of Nevada.

The animal’s population tanked and by the 1960s, they existed only in the southernmost part of the state.

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