

POSITION OF THE WILD SHEEP FOUNDATION

Title: Auction Tags
Submitted by: WSF Conservation Staff Approved by: Board of Directors
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Overview

Wild sheep hunting is tightly controlled because of the value placed on them as a limited resource with restricted ranges and lower population numbers than other big game species. Consequently, funding for conservation and management programs derived from hunting license sales is also limited. In response to the critical need to bridge this gap and raise more funds for wild sheep restoration and management, Wyoming Governor Ed Herschler issued the first-of-its-kind special "Governor's License" for one bighorn sheep in 1980. Governor Herschler gave the license to the Wild Sheep Foundation (WSF), then known as the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep, to be sold at auction, requiring 100% of the proceeds to benefit bighorn sheep in the state.

Unlike other agencies within a state, which receive funding from general appropriations, more than 70% of a wildlife agency's annual budget is supported through user fees. License fees, tags, raffles, and auctions provide critical funding for operations and game and non-game conservation programs.

Since the first Governor's Auction Tag, other state, provincial, and tribal wildlife agencies have followed Wyoming's lead by offering tags for wild sheep and other big game species at auction. Each jurisdiction decides what species and how many licenses, if any, it needs to sell to fund its programs. In the U.S., states often leverage these auction revenues with Pittman-Robertson Act funds, which can match auction proceeds 3 to 1.

The monies raised from Auction Tags are not only significant, but they are also a testament to the power of this system. The first Wyoming sheep tag sold for \$23,000. In 2025, this permit sold for \$215,000. To date, WSF has raised over \$3.19 Million for Wyoming's wild sheep by auctioning their sheep tags, representing 51% of the historic Wyoming Game & Fish Department budget for bighorn conservation, restoration, and management. Since 1980, WSF alone has raised and directed more than \$88 million in conservation funding to wildlife agencies through the auctioning of not only wild sheep tags but tags for Rocky Mountain goat, elk, moose, brown bear, mule deer, pronghorn, musk ox, and caribou.

Despite their significant contributions to species conservation, Auction Tags and some of the resulting hunts have been subject to criticism. Critics cite concerns over favoritism to those who can afford to bid on Auction Tags and the need for more equity for those who cannot. Some complain about the special privileges that buyers receive, such as circumventing the public draw process, once-in-a-lifetime tags or waiting periods, and, in some instances, extended hunting seasons. Some claim raffles or lotteries would raise equal

amounts of money as auctioning these opportunities and would be more equitable because more people can afford to participate. The behavior of some tag buyers has also received criticism for not being in the spirit of the hunt and Fair Chase. Some claim that Auction Tags represent a commercialization of public wildlife that is counter to the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation and that auction tags are driving up the cost of hunting for everyone. Some believe that Auction Tags remove an opportunity from a state's public draw, lowering the odds for those applying to draw a special tag.

As the leading organization marketing and selling Auction Tags for wildlife agencies, the Wild Sheep Foundation is committed to addressing the criticisms. It believes that more education and transparency are needed to maintain the trust in this proven system of conservation funding. The Foundation is dedicated to ensuring that the benefits of Auction Tags to the agencies issuing them and the wildlife they support are not overshadowed by a lack of understanding or misinformation.

Position

The Wild Sheep Foundation supports state, provincial, and tribal wildlife agency conservation efforts and their authority to raise funds as necessary to meet their financial needs in managing the wildlife resources under their care. WSF further believes that Auction Tags are consistent with the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation.

One of the seven "pillars or principles" of the Model is Managed by Science – The best Science shall be used as the basis for informed decision-making in wildlife management. The best-proven application of this principle is wildlife management decisions being made by wildlife agencies and their trained wildlife professionals. Consistent with this pillar, WSF supports the authority that states, provinces, First Nations, and tribes have to manage and conserve wildlife, including determining the most effective, efficient, and durable ways possible to fund these efforts. Additionally, the Foundation believes Auction Permits remain the most effective, efficient, and durable funding mechanism for species-specific conservation.

Another of the Model's "principles" is the Prohibition on the Commerce of Dead Wildlife. Some Auction Tags critics interpret this principle as meaning that wildlife is to have no commercial value. This part of the Model reflected a prior need in the early days of wildlife conservation to eliminate commercial market hunting, which, when legal, decimated wildlife populations in the late 1800s and early 1900s before this practice was made illegal. WSF maintains that the auctioning of special tags is similar to other forms of conservation funding, such as the sale of hunting licenses, stamps, and permits, none of which is counter to a Prohibition on the Commerce of Dead Wildlife or commercializing wildlife for private profits.

Addressing concerns over the behavior of some tag buyers, the Foundation appreciates a buyer's willingness to contribute at a high level to the conservation of a species they care about or to an organization or agency they wish to support. The Foundation, however, also strongly believes that purchasing an Auction Tag also comes with the responsibility to ensure that their hunt is conducted ethically, adheres to the principles of Fair Chase, and with respect to the game being hunted, the traditions of hunting, and other sportsmen.

The cost of some hunting opportunities, particularly sheep hunts, has risen sharply in recent years. The Foundation believes this is more of a matter of demand outpacing supply than what Auction Tags sell for. This is one reason why the Foundation's Mission is dedicated to increasing wild sheep populations wherever and whenever possible.

The Foundation further believes that people should know that Auction Tags are added to, not removed from, a state or province's public draw quota. It would also be important to know that most states that issue tags at auctions also offer the chance for everyone to participate by issuing raffle or lottery tags. Further, complicated and restrictive laws between individual states make it impossible for raffles to be a more equitable solution since many state gaming laws prohibit their residents from participating in online raffles. As a result, data shows that raffles and lotteries typically generate 50% or less than the amount generated by auction tags. The Foundation, therefore, believes this type of fundraising should be exempt from these rules because funds raised by hunting tag raffles are specifically for conserving a public trust resource that people care about, regardless of the state they live in, or which state the funds will be used in.

While the Wild Sheep Foundation supports wildlife agency authority, it strongly advocates for better communication from these agencies. A clear understanding of why auction tags are being issued, their processes for determining for what species and how many tags to issue annually, how monies raised are being used, and to what benefit would go a long way in helping everyone interested better understand the conservation process. Reviewing the history and the differences in monies raised between a tag sold at auction and the same tag sold through a raffle will also provide insights into which method produces the best results for the wildlife resource. With its long history of wild sheep conservation efforts and raising money to fund these efforts, the Foundation is committed to assisting with these communications.

Lastly, the Wild Sheep Foundation believes that while Governor's Tags may be how this system of conservation funding started and Auction Tags represent how these tags are sold, "Conservation Permits" is a more defining and fitting name that represents the many jurisdictions they now support.

