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Dall Sheep in Talkeetna Mountains Test Positive for Deadly Foreign Pathogen- Alaska Wild Sheep Foundation Calls for Mandatory Disease Testing of Domestic Sheep and Goats

(Anchorage)- Alaska's Department of Fish and Game released tragic news of the first positive tests for the foreign pathogen *Mycoplasma ovipneumoniae* (*M.ovi*) in both wild sheep and goats in Alaska.

Based on laboratory analysis of 136 hunter-harvested Dall rams from Alaska, 4 rams taken in the Talkeetna Mountains tested positive for *M.ovi*, while 2 mountain goats captured on the Kenai Peninsula also tested positive, out of 39 mountain goats analyzed.

M.ovi is classified as an old world pathogen that is not endemic to populations of wild sheep, goats or muskoxen in North America. Recent peer reviewed studies have demonstrated that *M.ovi* is the cause of large die offs and even localized extirpations of big horn sheep populations in the lower 48.

AKWSF President Kevin Kehoe talks about his commitment to wildlife conservation-

"Alaska is the wild sheep capital of N. America. Fully 25% of all of N. America's sheep live in Alaska as well as a large portion of the Rocky Mountain goats and muskoxen. During the past couple of years, AK WSF has attempted to work with domestic producers and ADFG to address the risk of *M.ovi* transmission between domestic and wild animals. We know from testing that approximately 5% of Alaska's 1500 domestic sheep and goats are carriers. We are offering to pay for the testing and mitigation of the infected animals with a total expected project cost of \$600,000, we are passionate about this issue."

Kevin continues- "Today's news comes as a terrible blow to me and fellow wild sheep enthusiasts including the folks that enjoy watching sheep from the Glenn Highway at Sheep Mountain."

The four Dall sheep that tested positive for *M.ovi* were harvested by hunters in the portion of the Talkeetna mountains known as game management unit 13A. This area is one of the most popular areas to hunt sheep in the state for Alaska resident hunters, offering easy access and friendly terrain. 13A is also directly adjacent to one of Alaska's largest agricultural centers and encompasses the sheep mountain hunting closed area, set aside for wildlife viewing.

"It makes sense that we had four positive *M.ovi* tests in GMU 13A" says Kehoe. "This is an area where domestic sheep and goats live in close proximity to their wild cousins. This is also an area where people enjoy sheep for viewing and hunting."

According to the ADFG's press release today-

"The department has collected surveillance samples from Dall's sheep and mountain goats through most of mainland Alaska for several years and sending them to laboratories for testing. That effort is credited for the *M.ovi* detection"

Kehoe expressed appreciation for ADFG while urging action- "On behalf of hunters and viewers of wild sheep we need to thank ADFG for their efforts. Now it is time to take the pro-active approach and require *M.ovi* testing in Alaska. We all own Alaska's wildlife; we need to protect it for future generations. AK WSF is calling for mandatory testing of domestic sheep and goats with subsequent mitigation and we are willing to foot the bill."

Important *M.ovi* Facts:

- *Movi* is a foreign pathogen not endemic to Alaskan wildlife
- *Movi* positive wild animals are the result of disease transmission from domestic stock
- *Movi* comes in a variety of strains, some more virulent than others
- *Movi* always reduces productivity and health of wild and domestic animals
- *Movi* has no cure or vaccine
- *Movi* has caused massive die offs and localized extirpations of wild sheep in the lower 48