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Relocated desert bighorn sheep blend in to a rocky outcropping at Franklin Mountains State Park.

Back From The Brink—Again?

Texas Landowners and Wildlife Experts Confront the Latest Bighorn Crisis

ARTICLE BY LYDIA SALDAÑA

In the rugged mountain ranges of the Trans-Pecos, the desert bighorn sheep has long symbolized the wild heart of West Texas. Once extirpated, then triumphantly restored, Texas' desert bighorns now face a new crisis—one that could erase decades of conservation progress if left unaddressed.

That sobering message set the tone at a landmark symposium held May 15, 2025, at Sul Ross State University in Alpine. Managing Desert Bighorn Sheep in Texas: Challenges of the 21st Century brought together wildlife disease experts, landowners, agency leaders and conservationists from across the country for a focused discussion on the



Back From The Brink—Again?

threats facing West Texas bighorn populations—chief among them a fast-moving respiratory disease known as *Mycoplasma ovipneumoniae*, or “M. ovi,” which is driving steep population declines across the region.

The event was organized by Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) through a collaboration led by Texas Parks and Wildlife Foundation, which provided funding and logistical support. Additional support came from the Texas Bighorn Society and the Wild Sheep Foundation, with the Borderlands Research Institute serving as a key on-the-ground partner and host.

“We brought in the best minds in bighorn restoration, disease management, and wildlife science—not just to talk, but to listen and learn from one another,” said Dr. David Yoskowitz, executive director of TPWD. “The future of bighorns in Texas will depend on strong science, honest conversations and trust across public and private lines.”

“We’re in a tough spot,” said Froylan Hernandez, TPWD bighorn sheep program leader. “We’ve lost over 50 percent of our statewide bighorn population since 2021. Our most productive herds are surrounded by risk. This is our watch, and it’s on us to do something about it.”

A CONSERVATION SUCCESS STORY—UNTIL NOW

Once found in at least 16 Texas mountain ranges, bighorn sheep all but disappeared by the 1960s due to unregulated hunting, overgrazing, habitat loss, and disease introduced

by domestic livestock. Beginning in the 1950s, the state and its partners launched an ambitious, decades-long recovery effort. Working alongside landowners, TPWD and organizations like the Texas Bighorn Society and Wild Sheep Foundation translocated about a thousand bighorns to their historic habitats, rebuilt public and private stewardship coalitions, and ultimately grew the population back to an estimated 1,500 animals by 2018.

That number has since been cut in half.

The culprit, scientists say, is *M. ovi*, a multi-factorial respiratory pathogen carried by domestic sheep and goats—and now widespread in exotic aoudad populations. Aoudads—or Barbary sheep—which were first introduced to Texas in the 1950s, have proliferated across the Trans-Pecos and beyond. They show little effect from the disease themselves but can transmit it to bighorns through a variety of sources.

Research from Texas and other western states shows that *M. ovi* compromises bighorns’ immune systems, leading to die-offs in adults and near-total mortality in lambs. “You can have lambs born healthy in the spring, and by 12 weeks, they’re gone,” said Dr. Peri Wolff, a wildlife disease specialist. “We’ve seen herds go through years—even decades—of no successful lamb recruitment because of this.”

AN UNWELCOME RETURN TO OLD CHALLENGES

In opening remarks, Clay Brewer—a retired TPWD biologist and longtime advocate for bighorn restoration, who serves



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Elephant Mountain Wildlife Management area, approximately 25 miles south of Alpine in Brewster County, consists of more than 23,000 acres.



PHOTO BY FROYLAN HERNANDEZ

Aoudad, or Barbary sheep, were imported from northern Africa in the 1950s and have successfully adapted to certain mountain ranges in the Trans-Pecos.



PHOTO BY CHASE FOUNTAIN

Bighorns were tested and collared as part of the relocation process.

as a consultant to Texas Parks and Wildlife Foundation—reminded attendees that Texas has been here before.

“In 1905, Vernon Bailey wrote that only full knowledge and protective measures could save Texas bighorns,” Brewer said. “Forty years later in 1945, Burch Carson, who was hired by the Texas Game Fish and Oyster Commission to document the decline of desert bighorn sheep in Texas, warned that quick action would be needed to avoid extinction. I wish the news was better today, but we’re in the same place again—facing the same kind of urgency.”

Texas Parks and Wildlife Chairman Paul Foster, a West Texas landowner himself, reinforced that message. “This is a pivotal moment,” he said. “The threat posed by disease is real, and it’s urgent. But so is the opportunity to work together—again—for the good of this iconic species.”

A CLEAN SLATE IN THE FRANKLINS

As part of that effort, TPWD recently completed a major step forward: the establishment of a new bighorn population in Franklin Mountains State Park in El Paso.

In December 2024, 77 desert bighorns from Elephant Mountain Wildlife Management Area—a known disease-free herd—were captured, tagged, collared and trucked west to the Franklin Mountains.

“These sheep came from a healthy herd, and they’re now on a landscape without aoudad,” said Hernandez. “It’s rare to find a clean slate in this fight, but the Franklins gave us that.”

TPWD will closely monitor the herd using GPS collars to track movements, lamb recruitment and survival. If successful, the Franklin herd could become Texas’ second disease-free source population—an essential hedge as the agency works to safeguard remaining strongholds.

“To watch those animals leap out and disappear into the mountains was unforgettable,” said Foster. “It was a win not just for El Paso, but for all of Texas.”

AODAD IN THE CROSSHAIRS

While *M. ovi* is the biological threat, aoudads are the main ecological vector. That reality dominated much of the symposium discussion.

Jose Etchart, a TPWD senior wildlife biologist, described the economic and cultural footprint aoudads have carved across West Texas. “They’ve adapted to our ecosystem, and the hunting market has grown substantially. For many landowners, they provide real income.”

But that success comes at a cost. “You can fly two canyons over and see another herd of 150 aoudad,” he said. “They’re everywhere. And every one of them is a potential disease carrier.”

Dr. Justin French, of the Borderlands Research Institute, shared new findings from the Chinati Mountains, where aerial surveys using thermal imaging detected roughly 8,000 aoudad in a single mountain range—about one animal per 40 acres.

“We’re likely looking at a six-figure aoudad population across the Trans-Pecos,” he said. While raw extrapolations suggest as many as 250,000 animals, French noted that figure is likely inflated because surveys focused on areas already known to have high densities.

French also reported signs of mounting pressure on native species. “We’ve seen a 25 percent decline in mule deer in the Quitman Mountains and 33 percent in the Chinatis,” he said.

“Meanwhile, the aoudad population is holding steady—or growing—despite extreme drought. Aoudad are better competitors.”

While competition between aoudad and mule deer may be manageable, he added, the stakes are higher for bighorns. “We have our work cut out for us,” French said. “Aoudads aren’t going away, and we need realistic strategies to address both competition and disease.”



PHOTO BY CHASE FOUNTAIN

Presently, there is no evidence of *M. ovi* in the Elephant Mountain desert bighorn herd, which made these sheep ideal candidates for the Franklin Mountains relocation project.

PHOTO BY CHASE FOUNTAIN



Many conservation and wildlife organizations are providing financial and resource support toward the restoration of Texas' bighorn population.

SEEKING SOLUTIONS FROM THE WEST

The symposium also brought in seasoned bighorn managers from Idaho, Utah, Nevada and Nebraska—states that have been managing *M. ovi* outbreaks for years.

Frances Cassirer and Hollie Miyasaki of Idaho Fish and Game shared results from their “test and remove” program, in which chronic carriers are identified through repeated testing and selectively culled. “It’s not a silver bullet,” Cassirer said. “But in some herds, it’s doubled lamb survival and turned declining populations around.”

Utah Division of Wildlife Resource’s Rusty Robinson described how his state has invested in fenced “nursery herds” for disease-free sheep. “It’s high-maintenance,” he said, “but it’s worth it, if it works. We are hoping these facilities can help us preserve clean animals for future restoration.”

Texas officials are listening closely. “We’re learning from every state in this room,” said Hernandez. “We’re behind the curve on disease, but we’re catching up fast—and leaning on our partners to help get us there.”

A PATH FORWARD—UNDER CONSTRUCTION

So what happens next?

In the months following the symposium, TPWD will convene an internal technical working group to develop specific management recommendations. Those recommendations will

then be presented to TPWD’s Bighorn Sheep Advisory Committee for further input before being considered by TPWD’s executive office for final approval. That multi-step process is already underway.

While no single, long-term solution has been finalized, wildlife officials have identified a clear starting point in the Sierra Diablo Mountains—site of the most recent disease event in August 2023. Encouraging signs are emerging: the population appears to be stabilizing, with a recent aerial survey showing a 50 percent lamb crop. Plans are in place for a fall 2025 capture to test and collar sheep, a key step toward assessing the feasibility of further restoration.

“This isn’t abstract—we’re moving,” said Hernandez. “There’s strong landowner support, very few aoudad, and real momentum in the Diablos. It’s our best shot right now.”

Still, Hernandez emphasized that long-term success will require the same kind of collaboration that made the symposium possible—where state agencies, researchers, landowners and conservation partners come together to chart the path forward.

“This is one of those moments where we either step up or step back,” he said. “And stepping back isn’t an option. The decisions we make now will determine whether bighorns continue to survive in Texas—or just become part of our history.” 🌵