

Forty bighorn sheep trapped in Alberta, Canada, were released into the Pine Ridge near Harrison on Feb. 9, giving Nebraska a fifth subpopulation of this mammal popular among hunters and wildlife watchers.

The 35 ewes and five rams were trapped on a reclaimed portion of a coal mine at the foot of the Canadian Rockies west of Edmonton, Alberta on Feb. 7. Seventeen Nebraska Game and Parks Commission staff and two U.S. Department of Agriculture veterinarians traveled to the site last week to assist in the operation and to bring the sheep home.

The effort is a continuation of the Nebraska reintroduction program that began in 1981. The release will bolster the state's herd by filling habitat in the Sowbelly Canyon area, which has not been home to bighorn sheep for more than 100 years, as well as diversifying the genetics of the existing Pine Ridge population.

The sheep were released on private land with the permission and cooperation from landowners. "Their efforts and participation are critically important to the state's natural resources," Nordeen said.

Nebraska's bighorn restoration began with the release of a dozen sheep from South Dakota into a 500-acre enclosure at Fort Robinson State Park near Crawford. Since 2001, 122 sheep from Colorado and Montana have been released in the Pine Ridge east of Crawford and in the Wildcat Hills near Gering.

Bighorns historically were found in Nebraska but were wiped out by disease, habitat loss and sustenance hunting early in the 20th century. Thanks to restoration efforts, the population in both regions now includes about 315 sheep.

The sheep were captured with drop nets set over an area that had been baited with alfalfa for several days. When tripped, the trapping crew, consisting of Game and Parks staff, Alberta Ministry of Sustainable Resource Development staff, private consultants and about 40 volunteers, subdued the sheep, and fitted them with blinders to calm them and hobbles to restrain them. Once removed from the net, veterinarians and Game and Parks biologists took blood, hair, and other samples for disease and DNA testing. Each was fitted with radio or GPS collars so they could be tracked by biologists.

The relocation was funded by the sale and auction of 17 bighorn sheep hunting permits issued in Nebraska since 1998, which has generated more than \$800,000. The effort also was supported by the Iowa chapter of the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep, the Wild Sheep Foundation, the Nebraska chapter of Safari Club International, the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, the USDA and other conservation groups and volunteers.