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Page: 2B

Title: Sheep hunters obtain access to Nellis range

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Nevada bighorn sheep hunters have all but gained permanent access to a portion of the Nellis Air Force Base bombing range, a state biologist said.

For the second year in a row, six hunters purchased tags to hunt the prized animal on Stonewall Mountain, an area that runs parallel to U.S. 95 between Beatty and Tonopah.

Supervising wildlife biologist Mike Cox said he is confident a permanent agreement will be reached between state and Defense Department officials, who he says have yet to sign a memorandum of understanding.

For more than six months, Nellis officials and state biologists have been negotiating for a section of the bombing range. The deal was expected to have been signed this past summer.

Until 1994's successful trial hunt, the land had never been touched by sportsmen. The arrangement allows hunters and fighter pilots to share nearly 60 square miles of land, instead of the current 10 square miles, Cox said.

A Nellis captain said earlier this year that the Stonewall Mountain area is not heavily bombed, but used as a turnaround point.

Hunters are briefed on ways to identify and avoid injury should they discover bombs and other munitions on the range.

"They're still actively bombing and ... we're having to work around them," Cox said.

Last fall, 256 sportsmen applied to hunt in the Stonewall Mountain area in November and December, Cox said. This year's figures were expected to be higher.

Six hunters were given tags to track the bighorn sheep, Nevada's official state animal. They paid \$100 to \$800 for the chance, depending on whether they were residents or lived out of state.

The Air Force agreed in the mid-1980s to permit 10 square miles of public access on Stonewall Mountain in exchange for closing off land near Groom Lake, a military complex the government does not acknowledge exists.

That land borders Freedom Ridge, an area that was closed to the public this year due to military concerns about security.

The Stonewall Mountain expansion would be the second Nellis bombing range site to permit hunting. The first site is in the southern portion of the 3-million-acre range, just north of Indian Springs.

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