

SUBJECT: Classifying aoudad sheep and elk as exotic species

COMMITTEE: State Recreational Resources — favorable, without amendment

VOTE: 7 ayes — Kuempel, McCall, Horn, King, Longoria, Merritt, Palmer
0 nays
2 absent — Hightower, Hilderbran

WITNESSES: For — Richard Winters, Exotic Wildlife Association
Against — None
On — Jerry Cooke and David Sinclair, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department

BACKGROUND : Aoudad sheep, also called barbary sheep, are a species of sheep originally from North Africa. These sheep were introduced into Texas in Randall County in 1958 by the Texas Game and Fish Commission, predecessor to the Parks and Wildlife Department. The department issues licenses to hunt aoudad sheep in eight counties in the Panhandle and elk in 15 counties spread throughout the Panhandle and the Trans-Pecos region of Texas. Elsewhere in the state, these species are considered “exotic,” and hunting is dictated by management plans developed by private landowners.

“Exotic animals” generally are defined as nonindigenous animals.

DIGEST: HB 1489 would remove aoudad sheet and elk from game species listings for certain counties in the Panhandle and the Trans-Pecos region and add them to the list of animals defined as exotic by the Parks and Wildlife Code.

Aoudad sheep would no longer be listed as a game species in the following counties: Armstrong, Briscoe, Donley, Floyd, Hall, Motley, Randall and Swisher Counties. Elk would no longer be listed as a game species in the following counties: Brewster, Culberson, Dallam, Deaf Smith, El Paso, Hartley, Hudspeth, Jeff Davis, Moore, Oldham, Pecos, Potter, Presidio, Reeves and Terrell counties.

The bill would add aoudad sheep and elk to current statutory provisions that allow exotic species to be hunted by aircraft and to provisions that regulate hunting of exotics from public roads or private lands and the possession of exotic animal carcasses.

The bill also would delete various references to aoudads and elk in the Parks and Wildlife Code, removing requirements that: those who sell and breed elk to obtain a game breeders license; that nonresidents secure hunting licenses for elk and aoudad sheep; and that the Parks and Wildlife Commission issue proclamations authorizing the hunting of elk on private land.

HB 1489 would take immediate effect if finally approved by a two-thirds record vote of the membership in each house.

**SUPPORTERS
SAY:**

HB 1489 would improve wildlife management practices in 23 Texas counties and at the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD). Everywhere else in Texas aoudad sheep and elk are considered exotic, and their hunting is dictated by management plans developed by private landowners rather than by TPWD. Aoudad sheep exist in the Panhandle only because private landowners stocked them on their ranches for their own use. The only survivor from the ill-fated attempt to introduce them into Texas is the statutory provision that bans their hunting in Panhandle counties. That is not a good enough reason to require that residents of these counties obtain a state license to hunt an animal that is considered exotic in all other parts of the state.

The same argument holds for elk, even though these animals were indigenous to Texas at some point in history. According to state biologists, Texas has probably had no endemic elk for thousands of years, and it is unlikely that significant numbers of elk will migrate to and re-establish themselves in the Trans-Pecos or Panhandle region. The elk that exist in these regions now are there because private landowners have imported and bred them. There is no reason to include them as a game species in any area of the state. Defining them as such unnecessarily penalizes both landowners, who are limited in profiting from their investments, and farmers, who cannot easily protect their crops from any loose elk.

HB 1489 would remove this unnecessary interference with private property management. Furthermore, it would allow the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department to devote more time and money to resources that truly are in need of management.

**OPPONENTS
SAY:**

Elk were once indigenous to Texas; they are not an “exotic” animal. Furthermore, they could reestablish themselves in Texas if given an opportunity and provided with appropriate habitat. Elk have been known to migrate into Texas from neighboring states. If these animals were classified as exotic, anyone could kill them with impunity. These animals are a resource that belong to all the Texans, not just the owner of the property on which they happen to stand. As a state resource, they should be managed as game animals by TPWD.

Furthermore, it is proper to have different wildlife requirements for different regions of Texas. The state is not an homogenous whole but encompasses a rich variety of ecosystems and wildlife. Establishing blanket wildlife management standards across the state ignores the diversity that TPWD was set up to protect.