The Honorable Kevin McCarthy  
House of Representatives  
Washington, DC  20515  

Dear Representative McCarthy:  

Thank you for your letter dated June 30, 2014, to Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack and me regarding the management of domestic and bighorn sheep on public lands. I appreciate you taking the time to share your concerns, and will respond to those that pertain to the Department of the Interior.  

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) continues to address potential interactions between domestic and bighorn sheep in fulfillment of its multiple use and sustained yield mandate under the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976. While BLM manages a large number of domestic sheep grazing allotments on Federal lands, the Agency is working with the United States Forest Service, state wildlife managers, tribes, and other partners to support sustainable bighorn sheep populations and habitat, and domestic sheep use on BLM-managed lands. I agree with your recommendation that more collaboration between interested and diverse stakeholders and experts would be extremely beneficial to help identify options for achieving domestic and bighorn sheep management objectives.  

The BLM is developing policy that addresses the potential for interaction and disease transmission between domestic sheep, goats, and bighorn sheep on BLM-administered lands. The draft policy will include guidance to achieve effective separation between domestic and bighorn sheep to reduce the risk of contact and subsequent transmission of respiratory disease between animal groups, as identified in the 2012 Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies’ (WAFWA) Recommendations for Domestic Sheep and Goat Management in Wild Sheep Habitat. Until the policy is finalized, BLM field offices are addressing the potential for interaction between domestic and bighorn sheep during the grazing permit renewal process, specific land-use planning efforts, and at other times as needed. In addressing the issue, BLM uses the best available science, and continues to work closely with Federal and state partners, tribes, industry, wild sheep conservation organizations, permittees, authorized users, and animal health and epidemiology experts.  

The BLM does not have to manage for zero risk to bighorn sheep from domestic sheep grazing, and WAFWA’s recommendations recognize that zero risk is “impossible” to achieve. The BLM’s draft policy will provide guidance to BLM field offices to analyze and assess risk on a case-by-case basis, and to make informed decisions that minimize risk between bighorn sheep and domestic sheep and goat grazing, so that BLM can assist state and Federal wildlife managers in their efforts to sustain bighorn sheep populations.
I appreciate your recommendations and look forward to continuing to work with you on the management of our public lands. A similar reply is being sent to the co-signers of your letter.

Sincerely,

Sally Jewell

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