



BIGHORN SHEEP IN DOMESTIC SHEEP GRAZING ALLOTMENTS

In 2010, the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) prohibited 13,000 sheep from grazing on their historic grazing allotments within the Payette National Forest in Idaho, driving one ranch out of business entirely and drastically reducing the operations of three others. The *alleged* reason for this reduction was an obscure regulation of the National Forest Management Act allegedly **requiring each national forest to maintain “minimum viable”** populations of all vertebrate species found there. Environmental activists argued that by allowing domestic grazing to persist, the USFS violated this regulation. Through a multi-year fight that included appeals of agency decisions, judicial reviews and even action by Congress, the original Forest Service prohibition to eliminate grazing within bighorn habitat was wrongly upheld in court.

Not only are Payette decision impacts spreading to other national forests with bighorn sheep populations, the Bureau of Land Management is considering grazing restrictions on federal lands under its administration, creating a west-wide issue that threatens a substantial part of the domestic sheep and wool industry. In April 2014, Forest Service officials indicated that within the year, they would make **decisions on the future use of “high risk” allotments grazed by domestic sheep, even though only 3 percent of federal sheep allotments overlap with** occupied bighorn habitat. While it is impossible to accurately predict the total impact of this approach, at a minimum 400,000 domestic sheep, and the families who raise and care for them, may be affected. The impacts are serious, affecting not only sheep operators and their employees, but meat packing plants, woolen mills, and even the military, which purchases **twenty percent of the nation’s wool production** to help equip America’s service men and women.

The facts are these:

- Domestic sheep and bighorns have co-existed in many of the same areas for decades without, apparently, decimating bighorn herds.
- There is no single, identifiable pathogen responsible for the most common respiratory diseases in bighorn sheep that can clearly be tied to contact with domestic sheep on the open range. In fact, there are documented die-offs of bighorns in areas far removed from any domestic sheep.
- USDA is heavily involved in research to identify the causes of bighorn diseases and transmission vectors. The sheep industry strongly supports this research, with contributions exceeding \$100,000 over the last 36 months. Yet, research **conducted by USDA’s intramural science agency, the Agricultural Research Service**, is specifically being *ignored* by USFS. In abject contravention to congressional direction.

ASI recognizes the legal obligations of the Forest Service and BLM to analyze all threats to the viability of bighorn sheep. **However, ASI does not recognize “single species viability” as trumping all** legal obligations for multiple use of federal lands, including grazing. Calls for closing various allotments and removing domestic sheep, in spite of the lack of clear scientific cause and effect, have already occurred. Given this, ASI requests a simple, equitable exchange: find suitable alternative allotments for those sheep operators whose permits in bighorn habitat have been reduced. This exchange represents more than just good intentions—making alternative allotments available will require completion of an environmental analysis and other clearances, and this can take some time. Therefore, no translocations of domestic sheep to alternative allotments should be mandated until NEPA is complete and all challenges to the use of those allotments by domestic sheep are resolved. ASI strongly supports this equitable approach allowing for the survival of the domestic sheep industry in the face of mounting challenges related to bighorn habitat.

For more information, please visit the ASI website at www.sheepusa.org.
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FY2016 Omnibus Statement of Managers:

BLM:

Rangeland Management.—The Bureau is directed, to the greatest extent practicable, to make vacant grazing allotments available to a holder of a grazing permit or lease when lands covered by the holder of the permit or lease are unusable because of drought or wildfire. The Bureau also is directed to follow the directive herein for the Forest Service regarding bighorn sheep conservation.

USFS:

Bighorn Sheep Conservation.—In order to ensure the Nation does not lose its domestic sheep industry or bighorn sheep conservation legacy, the Service and the Bureau of Land Management shall implement a variety of solutions, including the following directives: The agencies are directed to complete risk of contact analyses using appropriate data sources, such as from the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, and to share the findings with the public. The Service is expected to engage the Agricultural Research Service to ensure the best scientific understanding of where disease transmission occurs and the degree of that risk and to assist the Forest Service with identifying all allotments that are suitable for sheep grazing. The Service and Bureau of Land Management also are directed to identify and implement actions to resolve issues on allotments with a high risk of disease transmission, including, if agreeable to the directly affected stakeholders, the relocation of domestic sheep to allotments with a low risk, pending any site-specific environmental analysis. Together, the agencies are encouraged to convene a meeting of stakeholders interested in collaborating on strategies and solutions to address the risk of disease transmission and to report to the Committees on implementation of these directives within 60 days of enactment of this Act.

Proposed FY2018 Report Language:

Bighorn Sheep Conservation.—The Committee directs the Service to complete Risk of Contact analyses using the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies' occupied bighorn habitat maps, telemetry data, and recent bighorn observations. The Service is further directed to transparently and promptly share findings with other federal land management agencies, state and local governments, state wildlife agencies, and state and federal animal health professionals, including the Agricultural Research Service, permittees, and stakeholders. The Committee directs the Forest Service to engage the Agricultural Research Service and the aforementioned cooperating agencies and participants to ensure the best professional scientific understanding of where and if disease transmission occurs, and the degree of that risk, before making further management decisions that impact permittees. The Forest Service is further directed, if warranted, to use this base of information to swiftly identify and implement actions to resolve high-risk of disease transmission allotments, including if agreeable to the permittee, the relocation of domestic sheep to lower-risk allotments, with minimal disruption and displacement of permittees. The Forest Service is directed to provide quarterly briefings to the House and Senate Committees on Appropriations, both in writing and in person, on its progress and adherence to the directives contained herein.

Proposed FY2018 Bill Language:

SEC. XXX. The Secretary of the Interior, with respect to public lands administered by the Bureau of Land Management, and the Secretary of Agriculture, with respect to National Forest System lands, shall make vacant grazing allotments available to a holder of a grazing permit or lease issued by either Secretary if the lands covered by the permit or lease are unusable because of drought, wildfire, or conflict with wildlife, as determined by the Secretary concerned. *Provided*, That the terms and conditions contained in a permit or lease made available pursuant to this section shall be the same as the terms and conditions of the most recent permit or lease that was applicable to the vacant grazing allotment made available. *Provided further*, That Section 102 of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (42 U.S.C. 4332) shall not apply with respect to any Federal agency action under this section.

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