



United States Department of Agriculture

Office of the Secretary  
Washington, D.C. 20250

SEP 26 2014

The Honorable Matt Mead  
Governor  
Wyoming State Capitol  
200 West 24th Street  
Cheyenne, Wyoming 82002

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File # 04 002 00  
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Responsible Person: JC

Dear Governor Mead:

Thank you for your letter of July 9, 2014, cosigned by Governor C.L. "Butch" Otter and Governor Gary Herbert, regarding the management of domestic and bighorn sheep by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Forest Service on National Forest System (NFS) lands in Idaho, Utah, and Wyoming.

Grazing remains an appropriate and important use of NFS lands, supporting local economies and sustaining the historic ranching and farming lifestyle, which is integral to many small rural communities. The management of bighorn sheep, while maintaining a sustainable domestic sheep industry, is a complex and increasingly difficult situation. The Forest Service understands the importance of balancing multiple use demands with management practices to support viable populations of bighorn sheep and a healthy domestic sheep industry.

In August 2011 and June 2012, direction was provided to the agency's Regional Foresters regarding the process of assessing the potential for contact of domestic sheep and bighorn sheep, and the potential risk of disease transmission between the two species. The intention was to ensure a viable population of bighorn sheep. It is incumbent upon the Forest Service to review the conditions of the habitat for bighorn sheep so that the agency's management does not contribute to the decline of that species. The assessments and analyses are expected to meet the Forest Service's obligations under the National Forest Management Act (NFMA), and also to assist decision makers with making informed choices regarding risks and trade-offs affecting domestic sheep grazing on NFS lands and bighorn sheep population viability.

The assessment process was designed to be collaborative, coordinating first with State agencies and considering State wildlife management plans for bighorn sheep. When the Forest Service is determining actions within the bounds of NFMA, as well as allotment level planning in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act and the Federal Land Policy and Management Act, it coordinates efforts with affected livestock permit holders, local governments, adjacent landowners, and interested parties to identify strategic methods that can help resolve domestic and bighorn sheep conflicts. The type of approach used for each assessment is important. Assessments will include interdisciplinary participation and allow for collaboration with interested publics in order to develop sound recommendations. However, the outcome of the assessment process must be supported with a clear and reasonable rationale for the decision.

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The Forest Service has instructed its line officers that best management practices to maintain separation need to be applied to the extent they are effective in supporting both uses. When a line officer determines that the potential risk for contact, as identified through the assessment process, is at an unacceptable level, the officer needs to identify and analyze potential replacement allotments when developing management alternatives. Concurrent analysis for applicable alternatives to vacating grazing allotments will be part of the decision making process as part of ongoing collaborative efforts to identify and develop site-specific solutions.

The Forest Service has ongoing efforts to locate available and usable sheep grazing allotments throughout its western regions. Beginning in 2012, maps were generated with the input of State wildlife agencies and made available to help local Forest Service officials in their assessment efforts. These maps display active grazing allotments, vacant allotments, and occupied bighorn sheep habitat, along with other attributes needed for an assessment. The Forest Service will continue to review the status of these allotments and provide information to the field so that they can more readily see what options are available. The Washington Office will be working with Regional Foresters to help National Forest managers find alternative allotments that are suitable for domestic sheep use.

Again, thank you for your letter and for your interest in the management of NFS lands. A similar response is being sent to Governor Otter and Governor Herbert.

Sincerely,



Thomas J. Vilsack  
Secretary