



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 *supposed* 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 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 24 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 requires completion of an environmental analysis and other clearances, and this can take some time. Therefore, again as a matter of equity, ASI requests that no translocations of domestic sheep to alternative allotments be mandated until NEPA is complete and all challenges to the use of those allotments by domestic sheep are resolved. At this point, this is the only 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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REPORT LANGUAGE as Contained in the FY2015 House Interior Appropriations Report

Bighorn Sheep Research.—The Committee directs the Forest Service to work diligently with the Agricultural Research Service (ARS) in the development of scientifically defensible analyses, specifically on the probability of sufficient contact for pathogen transmission and, if there is transmission, the probability of disease and spread of the disease to the herd in the wild. The Committee is not convinced that this important step was thoroughly addressed in the Payette National Forest’s Final Environmental Impact Statement and Record of Decision announced on July 28, 2010, and further directs the Forest Service to cooperate fully with the ARS in a review of the risk analysis and assessment portions in that decision, with the objective of assuring a more defensible and sound basis for future decisions in other parts of the West where there are bighorn and domestic sheep conflicts. The Committee directs the Forest Service to brief the Committee on its progress every six months.

ASI Proposed FY2016 Report Language:

Bighorn Sheep Conservation.—The Committee directs the Forest Service to take prompt action to seek and enact multiple use solutions to ensure our nation does not continue to lose substantial portions of either our domestic sheep industry or our bighorn sheep conservation legacy. The Service is further directed to promptly 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, the and state and federal animal health professionals, including the Agricultural Research Service, permittees, and stakeholders. The Committee directs the Forest Service to specifically engage the Agricultural Research Service and the aforementioned cooperating agencies and participants to ensure the best professional scientific understanding of where risk of disease transmission occurs, and the degree of that risk. The Forest Service is further directed 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 Committee believes such solutions will not be possible without genuine collaboration among the most directly-affected stakeholders, all of whom are committed to multiple-use solutions. 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.

ASI Proposed FY2016 Bill Language—As amended from Sec. 437 of HR 5171, FY15 Interior Approps:

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 or other grazing lands used by the holder of the permit or lease are deemed unusable, in full or in part, by the Secretary concerned because of drought, wildfire, or any reduction or elimination of a domestic livestock permit or lease as a result of determination of a potential conflict with bighorn sheep. *Provided*, That the terms and conditions contained in a permit or lease made available pursuant to this section shall be under terms and conditions no less favorable to the permittee than those applicable to the permittee on the allotment being vacated. *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. *Provided further*, That the Secretaries of Agriculture and Interior shall engage the respective states’ wildlife agencies, departments of agriculture, animal health professionals, and the Agricultural Research Service prior to any decision, based partially or in its entirety on the determination of a potential conflict with bighorn sheep, resulting in the reduction or elimination of a domestic livestock permit or lease.