

**Bighorn/Domestic Sheep Interaction Working Group Meeting**  
**11/2/2021**  
**Lander, Wyoming**

**Introductions:**

**WY-WSF Representatives Present:** Zach McDermott, Joni Miller, Mack Miller, Jim Collins, Dean DiJenno, and Katie Cheesbrough

**WGFD Representatives:** Doug McWhirter, Daryl Lutz, Rick King, and Doug Brimeyer

**Other Organizations Represented:** Wild Sheep Foundation (Kevin Hurley on Zoom), Wyoming Wildlife Federation (Joy Bannon), National Bighorn Sheep Center (Karen Sullivan, another Board Member), WY Department of Ag., WY Wool growers Association, WY Stock growers Association, Several private landowners/operators, USFS from Denver Regional Office (Zoom), Congressional Staffers for Barrasso, Lummis, and Cheney.

\*Will get a copy of the sign in sheet from WGFD for full list of those in attendance.

**Meeting Kickoff (Doug McWhirter):**

- Summary of the Sweetwater Rocks bighorn sheep translocation evaluation proposal from the Pathfinder Ranches and approval to proceed with evaluation by the WGF Commission at the July Commission meeting.
- First time since a new (not supplemental) transplant has been reviewed since the Wyoming Plan was established (2003). And the first test of Appendix L, process 3.
- Additionally, this is the first time the IWG has worked in a Cooperative Review area.

**Sweetwater Rocks Overview (Daryl Lutz)**

- BHS native to Sweetwater Rocks
- Haven't been there since 1980
  - Likely remnant sheep from transplants conducted in the 1940s (desert and Whiskey sheep)
- Pathfinder Ranch proposal to evaluate a possible reintroduction presented to WGF Commission in July 2021.
  - Commission approved the proposal to evaluate and directed the Department to do an Assessment.
- Lander Regional personnel conducted ~30 landowner/producer contacts in the cooperative review area.
- Kevin Monteith was contracted to conduct an independent evaluation of habitat suitability and Risk of Contact analysis
  - Both analyses have been completed and a draft is in review by the Department
- Letter sent to affected landowners from Director Nesvik committing the WGFD to removing BHS to maintain separation of BHS and domestic sheep and/or removal of sheep if any group or agency attempts to use BHS to change grazing practices (we have not seen this letter as of yet).
- This IWG meeting kicks off the public process indicated in Appendix L
- Additional public meetings:
  - Informational:
    - 11/4/21 – Jefferey City
    - 11/9/21 – Lander (Zoom link available)

- Presentation of recommendations:
  - 12/14/21 -Jeffery City
  - 12/15 – Lander
- Intended Timeline
  - Formal presentation of Department recommendations from Assessment, IWG meeting, and public meetings to Commission in January 2022

### **Questions & Discussion:**

- Will IWG get a chance to see the proposal/recommendations to discuss prior to public and/or Commission?
  - Probably appropriate
- Has there been any discussion with the BLM (especially since there was no BLM representation at this meeting)?
  - WGFD had 2 meetings with BLM, one of which also included the Dept. of Ag prior to this IWG meeting.
- Has the WGFD reached out to the Office of State Lands and Investment?
  - Not yet
- What are the implications of having several Wilderness Study Areas (WSA's) in the area?
  - Additionally, where are we at with Barrasso's WSA designation recommendation process?
    - The WSAs in the Sweetwater Rocks area have been recommended for release from Wilderness designation and be changed to a Special Management Area.
  - Not sure WSA or changes to WSA's would have much impact to a translocation.
  - Might have impact on management (habitat enhancements, water developments, BHS removals).
- Why does Cooperative Review area go so far south while the hunt area boundary goes much farther north?
  - Cooperative Review area includes the Ferris and Seminole areas.
  - Used to be a small group of BHS at the base of Green Mountain.
- Which Boundaries were used for the Risk of Contact Analysis?
  - Not sure, will be clearer when WGFD has a chance to review Monteith analysis.
- How far out were landowners/operators contacted?
  - Pretty far North, indicated specific landowners
- More history on Sweetwater Rocks Transplant proposals?
  - Proposal to translocate was made in 1999
  - Another landowner led proposal was made 2013/2014
- What are the specific triggers for removal to maintain BHS/Domestic separation? What are the triggers regarding grazing changes and total BHS removal?
  - Not sure at this point

### **MAJOR TOPIC/POINT OF CONTENTION FOR AG INTERESTS:**

- Conflict between what WGFD intends and has promised and what BLM is required to do based on local Resource Management plan (RMP) and national BLM Guidance and standards.
- Landowners/Operators need a formal commitment from BLM that grazing won't change due to BHS transplant or proposal.
  - More than just a signed letter from the local Field Manager, something that will be policy and last changes in personnel.

- Issues with Operator (Sean Sims?) working with USFS and Utah on a BHS transplant and expanding herd encroaching on his operation and changing his ability to graze.
  - Letter received from USFS essentially means nothing at this point
  - Results from the Payette Decision and using foray distances of 20 miles in the Risk of Contact analysis.
- Department of Ag folks pointed out the “Exclusion Zone” that was established around the Ferris/Seminole areas based on transplants done in the 60s in the Rawlins BLM Field Office RMP.
  - Indicated that this is absolutely what would happen if the transplant occurred in the Sweetwater Rocks
  - Opposing point: no exclusion zone has been established in the Sweetwater Rocks area by the Lander BLM despite bordering the Seminole/Ferris area, past transplants in the area, habitat suitability assessments, and having a designated herd unit in the area. Additionally, exclusion zones are not a mandatory separation tool. The WGFD has already committed to remove BHS as separation mechanism.
- Bridger Teton National Forest BHS Amendment (Darby Herd) was brought up as a larger issue.
  - Operators interpreted the joint WSF/WY-WSF comment letter (June 2021) as not upholding the Wyoming Plan for the non-emphasis Darby herd.
  - Not sure this interpretation is totally accurate and Kevin Hurley commented to that effect
  - WY-WSF assured the concerned operator that we now have a better understanding of the Wyoming Plan and are committed to following it.
- Department of Ag representative suggested a signed **Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)**, at the very least, to ensure that all parties and agencies have a formal agreement with specific assurances.
  - Lots of discussion about the potential for an MOU and how to implement in the best way.
  - However, there was consensus that a carefully crafted MOU was the next logical step to moving forward.
  - A successful MOU could have potential benefits for all parties and could be a template for successfully navigating wildlife/grazing projects into the future.
  - This will likely push the WGFD’s proposed timeline back quite a bit, but worth doing right.

### **STEPS FORWARD/ACTION ITEMS**

- Each group (WY-WSF and Wool Growers) will go back to their boards and constituents and work out what their needs and assurances should be for an effective MOU.
- Katie Cheesbrough and Amy Hendrickson will get together and discuss the needs/assurances and see what we can or cannot work with. Perhaps begin a potential outline for an MOU.
- IWG will convene again Sunday, December 12<sup>th</sup> (prior to Stock growers Convention) from 2-4 pm to discuss what we’ve come up with.
  - Create subcommittee to write MOU draft.