

Sweetwater Rocks Bighorn Sheep Transplant - Area Landowner Concerns

Concern: There is not enough forage for bighorn sheep in this area, so livestock AUMs will need to be reduced to accommodate a herd of 400 bighorns.

How we plan to address the concern: Habitat surveys conducted within the primary release area revealed a forage base sufficient to support a herd many times larger than our proposed objective. This forage supply occurs in areas which are unavailable to domestic livestock, is not being paid for by permittees, and has not been used to calculate existing permitted livestock AUMs. In other words, this forage is in addition to current domestic livestock needs and will not result in adjustments to anyone's' livestock permits. In spite of these data, we are willing to reduce our proposed objective from 400 to as low as 200 animals if forage becomes a problem as the herd colonizes the area.

Concern: In dry years, during dry periods within a year, and/or during winter, bighorn sheep will come onto private irrigated hay grounds causing damage.

How we plan to address the concern: All released adult sheep (20-40 the first year) will be radio-collared and monitored as often as moneys and time allow. Thus, we will be able to determine where, when, and how long sheep are using private lands. Lander Region personnel are prepared to harass sheep off private lands if their use becomes chronic in nature. We are prepared to assess damage to private crops and will pay for such damage just like we would do for damage caused by other big and trophy game animals. Under a worse case scenario, we would not release sheep in additional years if animals from the 1st year "camp out" on private lands. We are also prepared to trap and relocate damage-causing sheep and even lethally remove chronic problem causers. We plan to develop 2 permanent water sources within the Savage Peak release area this summer which will hopefully entice sheep to stay off private lands by providing water in closer proximity to escape terrain. As sheep colonize adjacent rock piles, we will continue to develop permanent water sources in an effort to keep sheep in the Rocks as much as possible. Lastly, evidence from the Dubois Badlands, the South Fork of the Shoshone River, and the lower Deschutes River in Oregon (source herd for this transplant) indicates sheep in these areas spend relatively short periods of time utilizing croplands adjacent to their primary habitat areas (i.e., 2-3 weeks in the fall or winter). In addition, sheep in these areas rarely venture more than 200-300 yards from escape terrain. This combination of behavioral and habitat related activity leads us to believe impacts to private hay lands will be minimal and this use certainly is something our personnel can effectively deal with.

Concern: A transplant of bighorn sheep into the Sweetwater Rocks' 4 Wilderness Study Areas will result in the areas becoming wilderness. As a result of this action, we will not be able to use the area as we presently do.

How we plan to address the concern: After a thorough review of these 4 areas, the Bureau of Land Management recommended in March, 1990 that none of them be included in the Nation's wilderness system. This recommendation was strongly supported by our Department. Although the ultimate decision concerning this issue lies with the U.S. Congress, it is doubtful that the presence of bighorn sheep will affect their decision in any way. In a similar situation, the Department transplanted bighorns into the nearby Ferris Mountain Wilderness Study Area and the area has remained outside of wilderness status for at least 20 years in spite of the presence of bighorns.

Concern: The Department can not manage wildlife already in the area (i.e., too many elk, too few deer, too few antelope, too few sage grouse, etc., etc.), so how can you think you can manage an introduced bighorn herd. Also, anti-hunters will prevent you from establishing a hunting season on these sheep.

How we plan to address the concern: During the late 1980s and early 1990s when deer and pronghorn populations were above objective, our Department utilized every available technique to reduce herds in the Sweetwater area. We were beginning to turn herds down toward objective when the winter of 1991-92 pushed them much lower than we anticipated. Since that time, we have drastically reduced available licenses in an effort to build the herd back toward objective. For example, in Antelope Hunt Area 68 we reduced total licenses from 775 in 1991 to 100 in 1993. Conversely, we are currently placing very great harvest pressure on antlerless elk in an effort to reduce the Green Mountain herd toward objective. Late cow elk seasons north of Highway 287 have successfully reduced landowner concerns along the Sweetwater River and our overall management strategy has been very effective in reducing this elk herd. Although the Rattlesnake Hills elk herd is well above objective, some key private lands in the area have been closed to hunting, enabling the herd to build uncontrollably. Harvest in this area could easily be obtained if these areas were reopened to public hunting. Finally, we have created a new Hunt Area (No. 128) north of Beaver Rim to reduce elk which are pioneering habitats in this area. Sportsmen place a very high premium on the ability to hunt and harvest a bighorn sheep. There is no question we will be able to control a transplanted bighorn herd through sport hunting. If, however, harvest does not do the job, we could trap and transplant excess sheep from the area to control population size. This technique has been used with great success for many years in the Whiskey Mountain area near Dubois. Finally, anti-hunting groups may attempt to halt or prevent hunting seasons in any area of Wyoming at any time. However, our Department does not set any season to prevent it being challenged by anti-hunters. We set seasons based on the best information available and attempt to use these seasons to move a given herd toward our publicly set objectives. We currently have established hunting seasons for all bighorn herds in Wyoming capable of sustaining a harvest and have no reason to believe we won't be able to hunt sheep in the Sweetwater Rocks area if the herd attains our proposed management objective.

Concern: It will take a lot of our tax dollars to pay for this transplant and we feel this money is better spent on other programs.

How we plan to address the concern: The Wyoming Game and Fish Department is not financed by tax dollars, we receive all of our operating revenue from sportsmen expenditures for hunting/fishing licenses and arms/ammunition purchases, etc. In addition, we have already obtained between \$56,000-\$66,000 from private sources to cover trapping, transportation, and monitoring costs for the transplant. The only public money necessary to transplant sheep into the Sweetwater area involves salaries of BLM and Department employees involved in the operation. Long-term management/survey costs will be minor and conducted in conjunction with other management surveys whenever possible to further reduce Department costs.

Concern: The variety of bighorns you want to use for this transplant are an exotic species and may be placed on the Endangered Species list in the future.

How we plan to address the concern: Recent genetic and morphological analyses indicate that the "California" variety of bighorn we plan to transplant is the same animal as Wyoming's "native" bighorn sheep. Sheep for this transplant would come from healthy California bighorn source herds located in northcentral Oregon and northwestern Nevada. We are obtaining sheep from these areas for 2 reasons: 1) due to continuing lamb survival problems at Whiskey Basin, we don't have any "excess" sheep from within Wyoming to transplant to the Rocks, and 2) we are trying to utilize a variety of bighorn more adapted to habitats found in the Sweetwater Rocks area. Based on the above situation, the Wyoming Game and Fish Commission decided the transplant of California bighorns posed no threat to the State's native wildlife and the operation would conform with existing State statutes and Department regulations (in particular our Chapter 10 Regulation). To our knowledge, there is no chance the California variety of bighorn sheep will be listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act across their entire range. Currently, there are an estimated 10,500 California sheep distributed across 7 States and 1 Canadian Province. The vast majority of these sheep herds are doing well and expanding. The only bighorns which have been federally listed to date are the Penninsular desert sheep of southern California. The California

bighorn of the northern Sierra Nevada Mountains of California has been listed as a State endangered species and there is some talk of federal listing for this area's sheep. Even if this listing occurs, however, California sheep in other states and provinces will not be included under the ESA.

Concern: Transplanting bighorns will result in more sightseers and photographers and more "people" hassles for area landowners.

How we plan to address the concern: The presence of bighorns in this area may result in increased human use of the area. However, the primary release area is comprised of approximately 80% public land which is open for recreational use. In addition, recent acquisition of a large portion of the Sun Ranch by the Mormon Church has resulted in greatly elevated levels of human use in the area. During the last two years, a minimum of 115,000 people visited the ranch and over 400,000 visited associated portions of the Oregon Trail. Bureau of Land Management recreation personnel estimate these totals will increase through time as the Church continues to advertise this property to its members. We feel the number of people which visit the Rocks to eventually hunt and/or view bighorns will be insignificant when compared with the above situation.

Concern: Transplanting bighorns may result in the introduction and transmission of new diseases to our domestic livestock.

How we plan to address the concern: Prior to importation of bighorn sheep into Wyoming, the Oregon and Nevada Wildlife Agencies will provide us with a detailed disease history for all source populations. If we discover any diseases which are of concern to Wyoming, we will not trap and remove sheep out of that source herd. At time of capture, one of our Department's veterinarians will be on site to visually verify health status of each animal prior to loading. Thus, the likelihood of disease transmission from bighorn sheep to domestic cattle is virtually nonexistent. Similarly, disease transmission from bighorn to domestic sheep is negligible. Conversely, there is a far greater danger of disease transmission from domestic sheep to bighorns if the 2 species contact each other. Our Department is willing to accept the slight, but real risk of this transmission. We plan to deal swiftly and effectively with any bighorn sheep which is observed making contact with domestic sheep. However, long separation distances between the species (20-25 air miles currently) should result in a minimal amount of contact.

Concern: Transplanting bighorn sheep will unnecessarily restrict our right to graze the livestock of our choice, particularly changing our operation from cattle to domestic sheep.

How we plan to address the concern: Currently, there is only one landowner in the primary release area with a public land domestic sheep grazing lease. The Sun family holds a BLM lease valid for the south side of Green Mountain. The lease has been in non-use for at least 15 years and they have no plans to activate the permit in the near future. If the permit were activated, the family would likely winter their animals on their private lands along the Sweetwater River. We realize the potential serious negative consequences to bighorn sheep if the permit is activated and bighorn sheep become established in the Rocks, but are willing to accept the risk. It may be possible for a private entity like the Wyoming Chapter of FNAWS to purchase this permit from the Sun family and subsequently convert the AUMs to some other type of use. However, this option is not likely to occur unless we are able to establish a viable bighorn population. Concerning other landowners in the area: neither our agency nor the BLM can dictate what people do on their private lands. Thus, any landowner could graze domestic sheep on their property if they believe it is in their best interests to do so. We are again willing to accept this potential risk to bighorns. If transplanted animals begin to thrive following release, and a landowner wanted to convert his Federal grazing permit from cattle to sheep, however, we would probably recommend the BLM deny the conversion. The permittee would have to have his/her conversion request analyzed through the NEPA process just like any other federal lease holder. Our agency would have an opportunity to comment on the proposal at that time. If this scenario occurs at some future date, there may be some type of treatment

available which would negate the potential for disease transmission between the 2 species which would greatly lessen our concerns with this issue.

Concern: Mountain lions and coyotes will eat the sheep as fast as you can release them. This is not a good thing for the sheep.

How we plan to address the concern: We are currently developing a contract with the Wildlife Services Section of APHIS to conduct intensive predator management activities within the primary transplant area. These activities will be funded by our Department and private organizations and will be conducted during the initial 3 years of transplanting operations. We believe these activities will allow sheep to adjust to their new surroundings without having to contend with high predation rates. Some funding has already been obtained for these activities from private sources (\$11,000) and additional funding is anticipated.

Concern: The Game and Fish and BLM will impose a bunch of additional land use restrictions to protect sheep from people, again restricting our ability to utilize the area for livestock production.

How we plan to address the concern: The Department has no intention of asking the BLM for any type of land use restriction to support this sheep transplant. Bighorns in the Dubois area and along the South Fork of the Shoshone River near Cody are constantly being visited and photographed by people during the winter months and are generally doing well. Sheep in other parts of Wyoming deal quite well with human visitors during spring and we do not believe is necessary to “protect” sheep from people at any time of year in the Rocks. These animals will have to adapt to the way things are done in their new homes or else the transplant will not succeed. The Department is fully willing to accept the minimal risk human contact may pose to bighorns in this area.