

Understanding the Wyoming Plan

by Executive Director, Katie Cheesbrough

Wyoming has a unique way of handling complex wildlife management challenges. In a state with diverse landownerships, rich natural resources, and industries that depend on those resources, responsible management takes a level of cooperation and coordination that few other states have achieved. These progressive and collaborative management efforts are evidenced by Wyoming's novel sage grouse conservation plan, their cutting-edge migration science and corridor protections, and, most recently, the convening of a diverse group of stakeholders to work through challenging wildlife issues with the Wyoming Wildlife Task Force.

But, prior to the novel wildlife conservation efforts listed above was the Statewide Domestic/Bighorn Sheep Working Group. Established in 2000, Wyoming Governor Jim Geringer and U.S. Senator Craig Thomas convened a group of interested parties (including the Wyoming Wild Sheep Foundation) to develop a collaborative statewide approach to address the long-term stabilization of Wyoming's bighorn sheep populations and the domestic sheep industry. For four years stakeholders worked cooperatively to come up with the Final Report and Recommendations that we now refer to as the Wyoming Bighorn/Domestic Sheep Interaction Plan or as we refer to it, the Wyoming Plan. Out of this seminal plan, Wyoming's bighorn sheep management areas were delineated and defined. These bighorn sheep management areas fall into four categories: Core Native Herds, Cooperative Review Areas, Non-Emphasis Herds, and Non-Management Areas (see the below table and maps).

All of Wyoming's Core Native Herds are in the northwest corner of the state and include the Targhee, Absaroka, Jackson, and Whiskey Mountain bighorn sheep herds. These herds have never been extirpated, reestablished, or augmented through transplants. Additionally, these four large herds make up approximately 85% of Wyoming's total bighorn sheep population and represent some of the largest meta-populations of bighorn sheep throughout North America. In fact, the Whiskey Mountain herd was used as a source population from 1949 to 1995 with over 1,9000 bighorn sheep translocated to reestablish and augment bighorn sheep populations across the West.

Given the importance of these Core Native herds not only to Wyoming but West-wide, it's imperative that we continue to make these herds our highest management priority. The WY-WSF has continued its funding efforts to help elucidate disease dynamics in these populations, reduce growing recreation and development conflicts, work with the agricultural community to reduce disease transmission between domestic and wild sheep, mitigate highway mortalities, and continue to improve bighorn sheep habitat. Please enjoy the articles about our Core Native herds submitted by Wyoming's top-tier bighorn sheep managers and help us to support them in conserving these native icons.

Understanding the Wyoming Plan- Part 2

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In my last RamPage report, I discussed Wyoming's bighorn sheep management area categories as defined by the Wyoming Bighorn/Domestic Sheep Interaction Plan (the Wyoming Plan). These categories consist of Core Native Herds, Cooperative Review Areas, Non-Emphasis herds, and Non-Management areas (see below table & map). The Fall 2022 edition focused on our Core Native Herds and why they are so important to bighorn sheep conservation in Wyoming. However, Wyoming's bighorn sheep story is incomplete if we don't discuss the importance of these other management areas and how we work within them.

In this issue, you will find an article about the Whiskey Mountain Core Native Herd that describes how it went from one of the largest herds in the West to a current estimated population of less than 400 bighorn sheep despite major efforts by the Wyoming Game and Fish Department (WGFD) and the Wyoming Wild Sheep Foundation (WY-WSF). The story of the Whiskey Mountain herd highlights the complex challenges facing bighorn sheep and the importance of not putting all our eggs in one basket. Although the Core Native herds are our highest conservation priority, it's important that we don't lose sight of opportunities in our cooperative review and non-emphasis areas as well.

For reference, our **non-emphasis areas** include the Wyoming Range which contains the Darby herd just south of the Jackson herd, and the area of the bighorns just east of the Devil's canyon herd unit. **Cooperative Review areas** include the southern Wind River Range which contains the Temple Peak herd, an area in the center of the state encompassing the Ferris-Seminole herd and the Sweetwater Rocks area, the Sierra Madre and Snowy Ranges containing the Encampment River and Douglas Creek herds, and the Laramie Range which covers the Laramie Peak herd. The only current bighorn sheep that live within a **non-management area** are on the far east side of the state and include the Elk Mountain herd that we share with South Dakota (see map below).

We can view these other sheep management areas as our zones of opportunity. The Cooperative Review areas are places with suitable bighorn sheep habitat and historic bighorn sheep ranges. These are places that can and have been home to successful bighorn sheep reintroductions. Take, for example, the incredible success of the Ferris-Seminole herd. Continued transplants and focused habitat efforts have allowed this herd to flourish. This herd has just recently exceeded its herd objective and is now eligible to provide more ram harvest opportunities and could potentially become a source herd for other reintroductions and transplants. Additionally, significant habitat improvements and wildfires can create ideal conditions for bighorn sheep in these areas to expand their ranges. This has certainly been the case after the Mullen Fire in the Snowy Range, where collar data shows that the Douglas Creek herd is expanding into new areas.

By creating more herds in appropriate bighorn sheep habitat, we diversify our populations, allow for the potential introduction of new genetics, and by increasing geographically distinct populations assures that disease outbreak in one population doesn't completely decimate the entire state's bighorn sheep. It is for this continued opportunity and the greater good of Wyoming's bighorn sheep that we continue to fund Grant in Aid projects in these other bighorn sheep management areas.

Wyoming Bighorn Sheep Management Areas

Core Native Herds

- Herds that have never been extirpated or reestablished via transplants
- Highest priority for bighorn sheep management
- All efforts will be made to prevent contact between domestic and bighorn sheep

Cooperative Review Areas

- Areas of suitable bighorn sheep range where proposed changes in bighorn sheep management or domestic sheep use is cooperatively evaluated.
- Includes most suitable bighorn sheep range in Wyoming not within Core Native or Non-Emphasis areas.

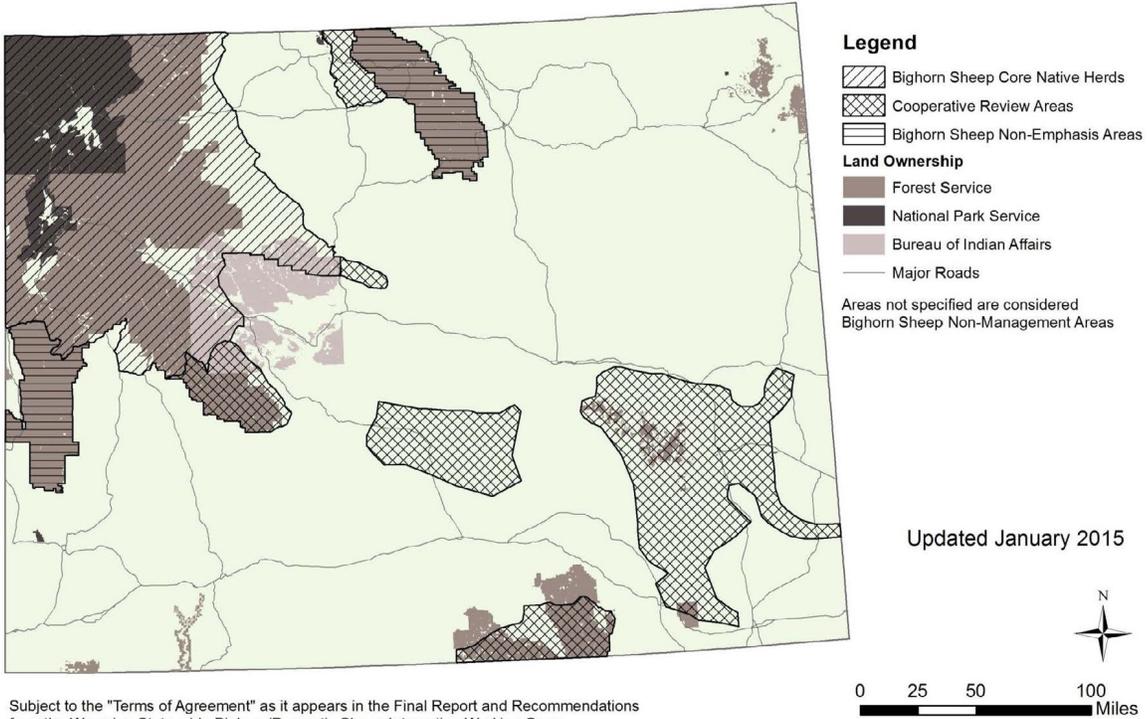
Non-Emphasis Areas

- Lowest priority areas for bighorn sheep management
- No effort will be made to prioritize/emphasize bighorn sheep unless agreed to by the statewide Domestic/Bighorn Sheep Interaction Working Group

Non-Management Areas

- Areas outside of identified management areas

Wyoming Bighorn Sheep Management Areas



Subject to the "Terms of Agreement" as it appears in the Final Report and Recommendations from the Wyoming State-wide Bighorn/Domestic Sheep Interaction Working Group