

Alaska Wild Sheep Foundation • Arizona Wildlife Federation • California Wild Sheep Foundation
Colorado Wildlife Federation • Elko Bighorns United • Fallon Nevada Bighorns Unlimited
Fraternity of the Desert Bighorn (of NV) • Idaho Wildlife Federation • Idaho WSF
Montana Wildlife Federation • Montana WSF • Nevada Muleys • Nevada Wildlife Federation
New Mexico Wildlife Federation • New Mexico WSF
Oregon Foundation for North American Wild Sheep • Rocky Mountain Bighorn Society (of CO)
Wyoming Wildlife Federation • Wyoming WSF • National Wildlife Federation • Wild Sheep Foundation

December 2, 2016

Honorable Ken Calvert
Chairman

Honorable Lisa Murkowski
Chairwoman

Honorable Betty McCollum
Ranking Member

Honorable Tom Udall
Ranking Member

Committee on Appropriations
Subcomm. on Interior and Related Agencies
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Committee on Appropriations
Subcomm. on Interior and Related Agencies
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairmen Calvert and Murkowski and Ranking Members McCollum and Udall:

We write in strong support of Congressional direction to the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) in the next Interior and Related Agencies appropriation to work closely with affected stakeholders and state wildlife authorities on the risk of disease transmission between domestic and bighorn sheep.

The problem of disease in wild sheep, of which 4 species range between Alaska to Mexico, is the greatest threat to these species. For bighorn sheep in particular, it is the biggest cause of decline and the biggest obstacle to restoration. Bighorn sheep began to decline in the late 1800s as domestic sheep brought pneumonia-causing bacteria to U.S. western rangelands. Decline continued until restoration efforts began in the mid-1900s. Where disease-free wild sheep are reintroduced to disease-free areas, bighorn restoration succeeds. In other places, the prevalence of the disease in the wild herds and the new infections from contact with domestic sheep continues to cause die-offs that inhibit bighorn population growth. State wildlife managers have sacrificed many wandering infected and even potentially-infected wild sheep in order to prevent spread of disease from wild sheep to other wild sheep. We seek a fair and equitable effort to prevent the spread from domestic sheep also.

There are extreme points of view on this issue that would have the Congress (or the agencies, or the courts) summarily just make it go away either by ignoring the disease problem or by ignoring the interests of domestic sheep grazing permittees. We have a better way that addresses the facts and finds solutions and we urge you to set this as the course for the Forest Service and BLM.

Congress's most recent directive, from the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2016 (Public Law 114-113), was a breakthrough in speaking to the shared interests of the domestic sheep industry and the wild sheep conservation community. The message needs to be sent again for better clarity and broader support. From our direct talks with woolgrowers, we believe the points and specific language below reflects an effective consensus path forward.

We ask that Congress' final FY 2017 appropriations report language emphasize collaboration and the use of current data on both wild sheep distribution and movements and the potential for alternative grazing areas for domestic sheep outside areas with unacceptable risk of disease transmission.

We ask that the language below be inserted in place of the report provisions entitled "Bighorn Sheep" in Senate Report 114-281 and "Bighorn Sheep Research" in House Report 114-632.

We ask that the following provisions in the appropriations bills and reports be struck from final FY 2017 appropriations: the provision entitled "Vacant Grazing Allotments" in Senate Report 114-281, and the provision entitled "Availability of Vacant Grazing Allotments" (Sec. 432) in H.R.5538.

We do not support promising alternative grazing outside the stakeholder-driven process described above. Without the analysis, these provisions are empty promises contrary to law. For situations of drought or wildfire, we could support a solution that involves appropriate environmental analysis.

Not only is analysis required and necessary, the issue will never progress until the people most affected and the responsible state and federal agencies can analyze and deliberate the facts concerning disease risks and available alternative grazing sites. It is premature either to move any permittee or to guarantee alternative grazing until all concerned know what we are doing. When the data-driven stakeholder process has identified – and the agencies have affirmed by analyses and decisions – the complete picture of risk areas and potential for alternative grazing, it will then be essential to have expedited means of changing grazing operations accordingly. We have already completed a number of these careful solutions and obviously cannot support a random act that pro-actively moves a grazing permittee to a risk area where we have already negotiated an agreeable vacancy.

Collaborative discussions using current data and the USFS/BLM Risk of Contact model should begin immediately in each western state lacking said collaboration. Maximum flexibility should be made available to resolve disease risks voluntarily among stakeholders as well as officially through agency action.

It will never be acceptable to waive environmental analysis. However, it will be necessary to expedite transfers and renewals of permits that move domestic sheep out of unacceptably risky

areas. This serves the interests of all concerned: our interest in rapidly resolving disease risks, and the woolgrowers' interest with minimal disruption to their business.

Based on these principles, designed to keep multiple-use interests working together on durable solutions, we suggest the following report language:

Bighorn Sheep. – The Committee directs the Service and Bureau of Land Management to develop Risk of Contact analyses for domestic and bighorn sheep while engaging actively with collaborative groups, other Federal land management agencies, Tribes, State and local governments, State wildlife agencies, State and Federal animal health professionals, grazing permittees, and stakeholders. The Service is further directed to use in planning and decision-making the most current data on bighorn distribution, including telemetry data, recent bighorn observations, and the capability of surrounding rangelands to support domestic sheep both within and beyond existing allotments. The Service and Bureau of Land Management are also directed to support with appropriate agency action such changes in domestic sheep grazing operations that reduce risk of disease transmission, whether negotiated voluntarily among stakeholders or resulting from agency planning, seeking the minimal necessary disruption and displacement of permittees, including providing alternative grazing in lower-risk areas through expedited decision-making. The report received (late) from the Forest Service in fulfillment of the committee's request last year indicated that few of the reported 43 cases of Risk of Contact Analyses involve stakeholders in collaborative processes, which the committee believed and stated was needed. The Service and the Bureau of Land Management are directed to provide semi-annual briefings to the Committee on progress and adherence to the directives contained herein.

Thank you for your consideration.