

## Feds have plan to restrict grazing for ranch sheep in Hells Canyon

### Domestic herds transmit disease to wild bighorns, report says; ranchers say research doesn't add up

By Rocky Barker - Idaho Statesman

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The U.S. Forest Service revealed Thursday a plan to keep domestic sheep away from wild bighorn herds in some parts of Hells Canyon this summer.

The action follows a Forest Service scientific report issued in 2006 that concluded domestic sheep transmit diseases, including pneumonia, that kill large portions of the bighorn herds. Ranchers say the research is inconclusive, and an attorney for one sheep operation said he is prepared to go to court to reverse the decision.

The plan came out during a hearing before Chief U.S. District Judge B. Lynn Winmill at the James McClure Federal Building in Boise.

The Western Watersheds Project, the Wilderness Society and the Hells Canyon Preservation Council went to court to ask for a preliminary injunction to prevent the Shirts Brothers sheep ranching operation from taking its sheep out to grazing lands in Hells Canyon in the Payette National Forest later this month.

But before the hearing, the Forest Service announced it was following the recommendations of the Nez Perce Tribe and will issue instructions for the Shirts that allow them to graze some areas but block them from grazing sheep in areas where the risk of contact with bighorn sheep is high.

"This is a big win for us," said Greg Dyson, executive director of the Hells Canyon Preservation Council. "It's the first time in a long time there will be no domestic sheep in Hells Canyon."

The Shirts family of Weiser would not comment after the hearing. But their attorney, Alan Schroeder, told Winmill the Forest Service did not have the authority to force them to alter the grazing plans this year.

"This will have a draconian effect on ranchers and their families," said Boise attorney William Myers, representing the Idaho Woolgrowers Association.

The Payette National Forest is conducting an environmental analysis of the impacts of sheep grazing with bighorns throughout the 2.3 million acre forest. A draft is expected by June with a final decision scheduled for December.

The agreement could change the way three other sheep ranching operations graze near wild bighorns along the Salmon River.

"We have been diligent in working toward a long-term solution," said Suzanne Rainville, Payette supervisor, "while at the same time seeking a short-term solution that will be workable for all sides."

Wildlife managers and environmentalists have expressed concern about disease transmission from domestic sheep to bighorn sheep in Hells Canyon since the 1980s. Bighorns disappeared from Hells Canyon in 1940.

From 1971 to 2004, 474 bighorns were reintroduced into the area now known as the Hells Canyon Recreation Area. Biologists estimated the population in 2005 at 875, a decline from previous years.

Keeping bighorns and domestic sheep apart is not easy. They are from the same genus and are attracted to each other, biologists say.

When large groups of sheep are moved through an area, small groups occasionally stray and seek out wild sheep.

From 1997 to 2003, biologists followed 154 bighorns with radio collars. Sixty-one of them died, and biologists determined how 49 of those were killed, the Forest Service 2006 report said.

Disease killed 43 percent, cougars killed 27 percent, and 22 percent died from falls or other injuries. Hunters, poachers and cars killed 8 percent.

Pneumonia claimed 25 of 29 dead lambs that were found.

But ranchers point to other studies in Nevada and a recent study in Hells Canyon that suggest the pneumonia that infects bighorn sheep is not caused by the same virus that causes pneumonia in domestic sheep.

"Eliminating sheep grazing will probably have zero impact on the health status of bighorn sheep populations in the western United States," said Anette Rink, supervisor of the Animal Disease and Food Safety Laboratory in Reno.

Myers also brought up a 1997 agreement between the states of Oregon, Washington and Idaho, the Idaho Woolgrowers Association and the Forest Service that allowed further reintroductions of bighorns in exchange for an agreement that grazing would not be impaired.

To offer story ideas or comments, contact reporter Rocky Barker at 377-6484 or [rbarker@idahostatesman.com](mailto:rbarker@idahostatesman.com).