

Bighorns vs. domestic sheep in showdown over Sierra grazing

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RENO, Nev. (AP) - Environmentalists are hailing a Forest Service decision to suspend livestock grazing in parts of the eastern Sierra to help protect endangered bighorn sheep as a prime example of how the Endangered Species Act can be used successfully to bring wildlife back from the brink of extinction.

But a national ranching organization and other critics say the one-year ban has only postponed an inevitable showdown over whether federal land managers will side with wildlife or with the ranching families who have worked the high country range along the California-Nevada line for more than a century.

The Forest Service reached an agreement last month with the largest ranching operation in the area, just northeast of Yosemite National Park, to halt domestic sheep grazing near Sierra Nevada bighorn habitat on one allotment in California's Mono County and limit the use of two others nearby.

The restrictions are needed to guard against domestic sheep spreading disease to the bighorns, which were declared endangered in 1999, agency scientists said.

The move won rare praise from conservationists who have been waging a legal battle to protect the bighorns for years in the Humboldt-Toiyabe and Inyo national forests.

"It is refreshing and encouraging to see the Forest Service listening to and responding to biologists, including its own," said Karen Schambach, California director of Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility.

"One more step toward restoring the Sierra's bravest mountaineer to its ancestral alpine haunts," said Paul McFarland, executive director of Friends of the Inyo based in Bishop, Calif.

The bighorn herd had dwindled to as few as 125 adults at the time of the federal listing but has rebounded to more than 300, said Daniel R. Patterson, an ecologist for the Center for Biological Diversity.

"We think this is a real positive story," Patterson said last week in a telephone interview from Tucson, Ariz. "It's a good example of how the Endangered Species Act works to bring people to the table to work out cooperative agreements."

The bighorns are found mostly on steep slopes and high alpine meadows north of Yosemite National Park to south of Sequoia and Kings Canyon national parks, Patterson said. They face increased threats of contracting a pneumoia-like disease from domestic sheep as they've slowly moved from Yosemite's high country north and east into the national forests, he said.

An interagency federal task force earlier recommended a buffer zone of between nine and 14 miles between the two species, the driving force behind the recent curtailment of grazing privileges.

Fred Fulstone, president of FIM Corp. based in western Nevada's Smith Valley, has the largest sheep ranching interests in the national forest. The descendant of a frontier family that settled there in the 19th century, he was recognized by state and federal officials as Nevada's Outstanding Rancher of the Year in 2001.

The U.S. Bureau of Land Management's state director for Nevada said Fulstone had worked hard to care for the range, volunteering to keep livestock off some of his allotments to improve mule deer habitat.

Fulstone did not return telephone calls seeking comment, but in the past he's questioned the environmentalists' motives in the case of the bighorns.

"They don't care about those bighorn," he told the Reno Gazette-Journal a year ago. "It's a land grab. They're doing it all over the West."

Cheryl Probert, the Forest Service district ranger overseeing the decision, was reluctant to discuss the extent to which

Fulstone supports the new agreement but confirmed it was done solely on a voluntary basis.

"It's obviously not their optimum alternative," Probert said from Bridgeport, Calif. "But we worked with them and they decided voluntarily to rest that Dunderberg allotment this year. We are working with them and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and California Fish and Game to come up with long-term alternatives."

Last year's grazing permit allowed for up to 900 ewes and lambs to graze that allotment, but Fulstone traditionally didn't have that many there, Probert said.

As has been the case in past years, the agency has been able to provide Fulstone and others with substitute areas to utilize on the forest "so he really hasn't lost any (grazing) privileges," she said. "Although, undoubtedly his management costs are higher because there are more requirements when he is grazing there."

The Washington D.C.-based Public Lands Council, representing the National Cattlemen's Association and the American Sheep Industry Association, is among those critical of the changes.

In a letter to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service earlier this year, the group's executive director, Jeff Eisenberg, said that state and federal wildlife officials had pledged beginning in the mid-1980s that any efforts to reintroduce Sierra Nevada bighorns in the area would not result in additional reductions in domestic grazing.

"(You) have our word that we will not `require' any changes in the use of your allotment because of bighorn concerns," Forest Service officials said in a letter to Fulstone's FIM on Dec. 20, 1989.

Eisenberg said it was just one example of how ranchers have been treated unfairly in the case.

"Breaking promises to landowners to facilitate the relinquishment of federal permits will only create bad feeling and resistance to conservation efforts," he wrote in the May 9 letter to the Fish and wildlife Service.

Eisenberg disagrees with the environmentalists' contention that the agreement is an example of how the Endangered Species Act can be implemented successfully.

"Those people say the craziest things," he said.

"The Forest Service did what it had to do. We're working now to stabilize the situation over the long term," Eisenberg said.

"We're looking for a solution that would take into consideration the needs of the bighorn sheep as well as the needs of the ranchers who have been in place there for decades - a solution that takes care of the needs of the (domestic) sheep," he said. "This doesn't address the longer term concerns."