

Environmentalists, ranchers at odds over livestock threat to bighorn sheep in Sierra

Jeff DeLong
RENO GAZETTE-JOURNAL

It's mating season for an endangered population of Sierra bighorn sheep, and experts are worried that amorous animals could be put in danger through close contact with disease-carrying domestic sheep.

Environmentalists insist the government should do more to keep the two sheep populations apart — perhaps by closing grazing allotments on federal land.

But a lifelong Nevada sheep rancher countered that his livelihood is at-risk. He said it's a type of high-stakes conflict with the government that is increasingly common across the West.

"They don't care about those bighorn," said Fred Fulstone of Smith Valley. "It's a land grab. They're doing it all over the West."

The issue centers on a population of Sierra Nevada bighorn sheep living in the rugged high country near Lundy Canyon, just east of Yosemite National Park. The bighorns, listed as an endangered species in 2000, are on a path to recovery that some say could be imperiled by the close proximity of domestic sheep that Fulstone and other sheep ranchers graze on federal land.

Domestic sheep carry organisms that cause a deadly pneumonialike disease. The worry is the disease could spread to an apparently recovering herd of bighorns that has increased in size from about 125 animals to 350 over the last five years.

The danger is acute during rutting season, when bighorn rams wander far and are particularly likely to mix with domestic sheep and even attempt to mate with them, critics said.

"You need to keep the animals apart," said Daniel Patterson, an ecologist with the Center for Biological Diversity. "The risk is very real and it's unnecessary. To be pretty blunt, it's a stupid thing that's going on."

The Center for Biological Diversity, which has threatened to sue the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service over what it calls inadequate progress in the recovery of the Sierra Nevada bighorn, is pushing for the "full removal" of domestic sheep from bighorn habitat.

"The logical approach is to modify the grazing up there," agreed Paul McFarland, executive director of Friends of the Inyo, another environmental group that has weighed into the debate.

Also concerned are officials from the California Department of Fish and Game, seeking federal permission to shoot any bighorns determined to have come in contact with domestic sheep as a last resort to prevent infection of the herd.

"That's the measure we hope we don't have to resort to," said Tom Stephenson, a fish and game biologist. "We're definitely concerned about the potential for disease transmission."

Stephenson agrees the "easy solution" to the problem would be closure of federal grazing allotments in the affected area but said such a step is not likely in the near future.

Instead, the state is trying to make sure the two sheep populations remain separated – in part through monitoring movement of the animals with the use of radio tracking collars attached to both bighorn rams and domestic ewes.

Officials with the U.S. Forest Service, which manages Fulstone's grazing allotments, said they have no intention of shutting down sheep grazing in that part of Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest.

"Grazing is a very viable and appropriate use of national forest lands," said Erin O'Connor, spokeswoman for the Forest Service's Intermountain Region based in Ogden, Utah.

"The bottom line on this is we have been working with Mr. Fulstone to make sure he is able to graze his domestic sheep," O'Connor said. "We're working very closely with the permittee to ensure grazing can continue."

Ranch faces 'ruin'

But Fulstone said he doesn't trust the Forest Service, which he believes is working with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the California Department of Fish and Game toward the goal of booting his sheep from public land. Fulstone said the federal grazing allotments are critical to his Nevada-based ranching operation, which currently includes about 15,000 ewes and lambs and produces 1 million pounds of meat and 100,000 pounds of wool annually.

"We've been all our lives trying to build up this operation," said Fulstone, 85. "This would put us out of business. It would ruin our whole operation.

"It's criminal what they're doing."

Fulstone said he removed sheep a couple of weeks ago from one grazing allotment of concern that is located north of Lundy Canyon. But he intends to graze 1,650 animals on an adjoining allotment beginning Oct. 1.

Fulstone has found allies at the Nevada Department of Agriculture and University of Nevada, Reno, where some officials are questioning both the risk of disease from domestic sheep and whether the Sierra Nevada bighorn are truly a distinct population that warrants endangered species status.

"It may be that domestic sheep pose no threat to bighorns," said David Thawley, dean of the UNR College of Agriculture, Biotechnology and Natural Resources.

"There appears to be a reluctance to recognize that," Thawley said. "I'm not too sure a fully balanced scientific approach is being taken."

Thawley's concerns are based largely on recent research by Dr. Annette Rink of the Nevada Department of Agriculture's Animal Disease Laboratory.

Rink has found that pasteurized bacteria that can cause deadly pneumonia in bighorn is present normally in the animals. When bighorn are stressed, the bacteria can trigger disease and significant deaths occur without any contact with domestic sheep, Rink said.

"Some of the bighorn sheep die-offs might be completely independent of contact with domestic sheep," Rink said. "Not every time there is direct contact can you be certain there will be disease."

While she admits her studies in the area are limited, Rink said genetic research suggests the Sierra Nevada bighorns now listed as endangered might not be any different than desert bighorns found to the east, which are not listed.

"I at this point have my doubts there is such a thing as a Sierra Nevada bighorn sheep," Rink said.

Mike Cox, a biologist with the Nevada Department of Agriculture, acknowledges disagreement over the situation but said from his perspective, there's little doubt domestic sheep can pose a very real disease danger to bighorns.

Contact with domestic sheep was one possibility explored last winter during a die-off of California bighorn sheep in the Santa Rosa Mountains north of Winnemucca. The cause of that die-off was never determined.

"Any time there's a situation of domestics being thrown in with bighorn sheep, the bighorns die within a short time frame," Cox said. "It's a constant concern hanging over our heads."

The unfolding issue east of Yosemite is being watched closely in Nevada, Cox acknowledged.

"There's spillover into Nevada," Cox said. "Everyone's on their guard."