

Lawsuit seeks protection for bighorn sheep

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SACRAMENTO - The government isn't doing enough to protect the endangered Sierra Nevada bighorn sheep, a population numbering only in the hundreds, an environmental group said in a federal lawsuit filed Thursday.

Among the most pressing concerns is the proximity of domestic sheep to bighorn habitat, a situation biologists fear is spreading diseases between the two populations, the Center for Biological Diversity said in its lawsuit, which was filed in federal court in Sacramento.

The wild sheep live high in the Eastern Sierra, where they are threatened by mountain lions and genetic problems caused by inbreeding because of the small surviving population.

Before the turn of the century, the number of wild bighorns in the Sierra numbered in the thousands. Only about 100 survived as recently as 1998, a number that has crept up to around 300 today.

The Sierra bighorn sheep live at elevations above 10,000 feet most of the year but move lower in winter to find food.

The lawsuit singled out as a particular problem the decision by the U.S. Forest Service to allow ranchers to graze domesticated sheep and goats on public land that the environmental group says is crucial to the survival of the wild sheep.

Domestic sheep not only compete for food but can spread diseases such as scabies and pneumonia to their wild cousins, who then spread the illnesses to other bighorns. State wildlife managers say they might have to kill bighorns that could be exposed to domestic flocks as a way to protect the wild herd.

The environmental group wants the court to order the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to complete critical habitat and recovery plans for the sheep. It says the plans are six years overdue.

Those reports would help the Forest Service, National Park Service and U.S. Bureau of Land Management better protect the wild bighorns, said Daniel Patterson, a biologist with the Arizona-based center.

"We try to put as much of our resources as we can into recovery efforts rather than into developing critical habitat designations that don't do a lot for a species," said Al Donner, a spokesman for the Fish and Wildlife Service.

He said officials couldn't comment further because they hadn't seen the lawsuit.

The environmental group wants the federal government to protect sheep habitat in the Inyo and Humboldt-Toiyabe national forests, along with neighboring land administered by the Bureau of Land Management.