

Tuesday, March 14, 2006

## Pneumonia Outbreak in Bighorn Sheep Has Biologists Concerned

By MELANIE DABOVICH  
*The Associated Press*

Eight Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep from the Gila National Forest have died since late December from a highly virulent disease that has potential to kill entire herds, but experts hope that the worst of the outbreak has passed.

"We're cautiously optimistic at this point. It's certainly a loss of some sheep, but we did not have the loss we were expecting," said Luis Rios, Southwest Area Chief for the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish in Las Cruces.

Game and Fish staff were alerted to several bighorn deaths in the Glenwood Ranger District by a hunting guide in late December, Rios said.

A subsequent flyover by the department revealed three of 16 radio-collared bighorns had died and ground crews discovered four uncollared animals also died. One more collared sheep was found dead in mid-February, he said.

Rios said samples were collected and laboratory tests showed the sheep died from bacterial pneumonia, a disease commonly carried by domestic sheep and goats.

Based on a sample group of four mortalities from the 16 collared sheep, bighorn sheep biologist Eric Romanger speculates that a quarter of the 100-plus herd might have died

from the disease.

"If it were only 25 percent, we'd breathe a sign of relief. The sample group is not really representative, but we suspect at least that much," he said.

New Mexico's population of Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep has reached nearly 1,000 for the first time since the late 1800s, Romanger said.

There are herds around Wheeler Peak, Pecos and the Latir Wilderness in the north and the Manzano Mountains, Turkey Creek and the San Francisco River area in the south.

It is the San Francisco herd that's infected. Established in the 1960s, the once strong 150-200 member herd was reduced to a mere 38 by a previous, more devastating pneumonia outbreak that started in the early 1990s, Romanger said.

Despite previous losses, pneumonia outbreaks aren't common, Romanger said. Bacterial pneumonia is highly contagious and can be spread to bighorn by nose-to-nose contact with domestic sheep and goats.

"It's your classic Old World disease attacking a New World animal, just like smallpox and native populations. (Domesticated sheep) all lived through the die-off in Europe 1,000 years ago," Romanger said. "The disease has little effect on domestic sheep but will kill bighorns."

The department's goal is to keep bighorn sheep separated from domes-

tic animals to prevent the spread of the disease. But because public lands are often interwoven with private land in New Mexico, it's hard to prevent contact or determine when contact might have occurred.

"We think the most likely contact recently occurred at a private sheep ranch in Arizona, where the San Francisco herd also roams. That is the most obvious place, but it could also be a mom and pop with three or four sheep on their land," Romanger said.

Daniel Patterson, desert ecologist with the Center for Biological Diversity in Tucson, Ariz., said it's unacceptable to lose bighorn sheep to disease in their native habitat.

"It's a totally preventable situation. This is an animal husbandry issue. People on public or private land have an ethical responsibility to take care of their livestock," he said. "A lot of money has been invested in bighorn conservation, and hopefully the state Game and Fish Department and forestry can put a stop to it."

Romanger said the department will conduct a flyover in May to assess the effects of the outbreak.

"We're letting (the outbreak) run its course. But without the tip off and radio collars, we were just cruising along, thinking everything was OK," he said.