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Pneumonia claims at least 8 local bighorn

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At least eight bighorn sheep have died of bacterial pneumonia in the past three months near the San Francisco River in the Glenwood Ranger District of the Gila National Forest, wildlife officials confirmed Monday.

Daniel R. Patterson, ecologist and deserts program director for the Center for Biological Diversity, a nonprofit conservation group, said the deaths could likely be attributed to contact with domestic sheep or goats, which can carry the disease without feeling its harmful affects.

"It's a huge problem," he said. "There have been big investments made in recovery of bighorn, but this is a continuation of a deadly pattern. It's likely the livestock spread disease, and everybody's good efforts can be wiped out by one person who's not taking good care of their livestock."

Patterson said Bureau of Land Management guidelines call for domestic livestock to be kept nine miles away from any known bighorn herd to help prevent transmission of diseases such as bacterial pneumonia. He also noted that diseases fatal to the big-

horn can be carried by flies.

Pat Morrison, district ranger for the Glenwood District, said the strain of pneumonia that claimed the life of one bighorn was determined to be a particularly virulent one. She was told by a bighorn biologist for the New Mexico Game and Fish Department that the original prognosis for the herd, believed to be between 100 to 120 animals, was not good.

"It's highly contagious, spreads quickly and has the potential to wipe out a herd," she said.

But she noted that the animals have a wide range, including Arizona, and it would be difficult to pinpoint where the bighorn may have been infected. But Patterson insists the likely culprit was domestic animals.

"Not keeping their domestic goats or sheep away from bighorn is one of the big reasons they've been knocked back -- with fatal diseases from livestock," he said. "It seems like we need to learn from these past mistakes and make sure people are keeping their livestock where they belong. This is a completely avoidable situation in most cases."

But Luis Rios, the southwest area

chief for the Game Department, said Monday that the situation is not as bleak as it seemed earlier in the year.

"The outlook is not as bad as we originally thought," he said. "A hunter and guide alerted us to dead sheep on the mountain, so we flew over the range on Dec. 30 and there were three mortality signals from radio collars. Within the next few days, we went on the ground and found an additional four mortalities without collars."

At that point, wildlife officials were pessimistic about the herd's chances, after they received necropsy results on one young bighorn which confirmed the animal had died of bacterial pneumonia.

"Many times it comes from domestic sheep or goats, but we don't know where it came from," Rios said. "On Feb. 16, we made another flight and picked up one more mortality with a collar, so there are four mortalities with a collar, and four without, for a total of eight."

But with only one confirmed additional death in more than a month's time, Rios believes the bighorn may have turned the corner on the pneu-

monia outbreak.

“It certainly does appear that we dodged the big bullet,” he said. “It can be extremely devastating to big-horn sheep, with mortality of 80-100 percent. We’ll have scheduled flights to monitor the sheep we have collars on, but it appears we likely won’t have any more mortalities.”

There had been 16 collared sheep prior to the pneumonia outbreak, which claimed 25 percent of the collared population.

Rios said the herd was reintroduced to the region about 40 years ago and that this is not the first time there has been a die-off. About a decade ago, when he worked in the Glenwood District as a wildlife biologist, the herd had a substantial decline in numbers, though wildlife officials never determined the cause. At one time, the herd numbered more than 200, he said.