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Two more sheep found dead

PNEUMONIA: Scientists worry that widespread illness could wipe out gains in the herds.

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Two more Peninsular bighorn sheep have died in the mountains that rise above the Coachella Valley, officials said Wednesday, leaving biologists struggling to figure out why pneumonia is spreading among the endangered animals and how they can stop its deadly progression.

"Our big concern is that, with this relatively large number of deaths due to pneumonia, we're at the beginning of an epidemic," said Walter Boyce, director of the UC Davis Wildlife Health Center.

Biologists want to know if the pneumonia that has killed seven sheep in less than three weeks is being spread by a bacteria or a virus that is transmitted either by nose-to-nose contact or by a flying insect, Boyce said.

A blood sample from a sick animal would provide the most accurate clues and that's what field biologists will attempt to get, he said.

"We have to figure out what the cause is and that will determine what management options we have," Boyce said. State and federal wildlife agencies could try to isolate a herd that is sick, but may have few options if the pneumonia is being transmitted by a gnat, he said.

The pneumonia is attacking young and

old, males and females, Boyce said.

Boyce said some good news was received Wednesday when a field biologist from UC Davis surveyed the mountains by air and received live signals from about 50 radio collars on animals throughout their habitat. The radio signals can indicate whether the animals are still alive, Boyce said.

The sheep, named for the Peninsular mountain ranges that extend from Palm Springs into Baja California, are considered endangered by the federal government. They only recently grew in numbers to 705, up from a low of 280 in 1996.

"It's a big potential setback for recovery," said Daniel Patterson, desert ecologist with the Center for Biological Diversity, a nonprofit organization that has filed lawsuits to protect the sheep's most crucial habitat to ensure the animal's survival.

The most recent sheep carcasses were discovered Saturday and Monday, when biologists with the Bighorn Institute found two males, one a yearling, in the northern Santa Rosa Mountains west of Highway 74, said Jim DeForge, director of the Palm Desert institute.

DeForge said institute biologists have been combing the mountains every day looking for sheep.

"The scary thing is," he said, "we have in the northern Santa Rosas 15 yearling rams and we can't find but one or two of them."

Institute biologists drove the body of the yearling to a state lab in San Bernardino for analysis. The other sheep, a 7-year-old, was discovered in such remote terrain that the biologists took the heart, lungs and tissues from the carcass so they could be analyzed at the lab, DeForge said.



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