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Two Types of Sheep, One Woolly Dispute

Sierra bighorns and their domestic cousins are caught in a battle over grazing rights.

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LEE VINING, Calif. Where the timber ends and granite stands against the clouds, four Sierra Nevada bighorn rams freeze for an instant noses facing the wind, horns curling from their heads, haunches taut. Then, silently, they vanish among the jagged crags and canyons between Yosemite and Mono Lake.

About 15 miles to the north, domestic sheep rancher Fred Fulstone gamely hauls his legs up a steep hillside of bitterbrush and sage. Then, spelling his lungs, the 85-year-old stockman watches somberly as government workers fasten tracking collars to five ewes. The devices are supposed to prevent his sheep from straying off undetected and infecting bighorns with pneumonia.

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FOR THE RECORD:
Bighorn sheep In an article in Sunday's California section about bighorn sheep, Peter Galvin of the Center for Biological Diversity was incorrectly quoted as saying the "wildlife industry" wielded influence in the government's handling of grazing conflicts between the bighorns and domestic sheep. Galvin said the "livestock industry" influenced the government's handling of the issue.

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Since the 19th century, the bighorns and Sierra sheepmen have been symbols of the wild and free-ranging Western frontier. But today they are at odds, their fate intertwined in a costly, highly politicized battle over grazing rights on public lands.

Fulstone's fight has become a focal point for bighorn-domestic sheep conflicts that sheep industry associations say could affect grazing of 125,000 animals in California, Nevada, Arizona and South Dakota.

"It is being closely watched by the sheep industry and other livestock producers that rely on public land grazing," said Lesa Eidman, executive director of the California Wool Growers Assn. "Those producers who lose access to public lands will have to cut back the number of sheep they graze, and that will have severe economic impacts on them, local communities and the industry."

Pressed by the livestock industry, environmentalists and politicians, federal officials in the Sierra have struggled to accommodate both wild and domestic sheep, which consume the same high-country brush and grasses during the summer.

Once abundant, the bighorns declined so precipitously that six years ago they were added to the federal endangered species list. But as the population began to recover and bighorns wandered onto land used by domestic sheep, wildlife officials feared that bighorns would be exposed to a disease that could wipe out entire herds and undo a $5-million recovery effort.

Forest managers have closed some areas to commercial grazing and placed new restrictions on most of the remaining eastern Sierra sheepherders, whose industry already was suffering from foreign competition and loss of federal price supports for wool.

"We'll be the endangered species," said Fulstone, who has been fattening sheep on federal land for 70 years and wants the bighorns moved.

Fulstone, who had heart bypass surgery several years ago, continues to run his family's Nevada ranch along with his daughter and occasionally rides miles on a horse to check on his flocks. "We love this life," he said.
"It's our culture, and should not be thrown away for 20 bighorn sheep&.
This could ruin us."

Wildlife biologists think about 350 bighorns are left in their historic range along 200 miles of the central and southern Sierra that is partly occupied by domestic sheep.

The bighorns had dwindled to 125 by 1999 before they were classified as endangered. The population was devastated in the 1800s by hunting. In recent decades, mountain lions and severe winters took the heaviest toll.

Now, the government draft plan for bighorn recovery cites pneumonia transmission from domestic sheep as a major threat, especially when wild rams roam widely in search of ewes during the fall rutting season. One radio-collared ram traveled 33 miles in a month.

"The problem is real," said Robert D. Williams, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service supervisor in Reno. "We could lose & years of recovery in one short [grazing] season."

In a series of experiments since the late 1980s, captive bighorn sheep died of pneumonia when they were penned with domestic sheep or were inoculated with bacteria from them.

To minimize the danger of disease transmission, federal officials have closed some parts of the mountain range to domestic sheep including some of Fulstone's grazing areas.

Fulstone averted more closures this summer; his flocks were allowed to graze across about 20 square miles of the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest.
But his herders are required to make frequent counts of sheep, tend them with extra dogs and promptly report any strays.

Meanwhile, state Fish and Game biologists have been capturing wild rams and fitting them with radio collars so they can be tracked from the air and ground. And they are seeking federal permission to kill, if necessary, any bighorns that come in contact with domestic sheep.

That prospect outraged conservationists, who want the grazing permits canceled. "It is so frustrating the ranching industry is able to wield such influence," said Peter Galvin, conservation director and co-founder of the Center for Biological Diversity. "Instead of a conservative solution, [government officials] implement these difficult-to-enforce, Rube Goldberg, unbelievably complex solutions to a simple problem. The domestic sheep should not be around the endangered bighorns."

Native American rock drawings show that bighorns roamed California long before the first European settlers introduced domestic sheep. But by the late 1800s, hundreds of thousands of sheep were feeding in the Sierra and the bighorns were disappearing so fast that in 1878 a state hunting ban was imposed.

A century later, bighorns from the few remaining herds were reintroduced to other parts of their historic range. In the late 1980s, 38 bighorns were moved to Lee Vining Canyon

as part of an effort to reestablish the animals in nearby Yosemite National Park.

Within a year, some had showed up in Fulstone's grazing area in the Inyo National Forest.

A U.S. Forest Service official assured Fulstone that the wild sheep would not force curtailment of his grazing. However, after about two dozen of his sheep strayed into bighorn habitat in Yosemite in 1995, the Forest Service reduced the grazing areas allowed under Fulstone's permit. Over his protests, the entire Inyo allotment was terminated a few years later.

To Fulstone, the government broke its word. Then he received worse news.

Bighorns had been spotted north of Lundy Canyon, close to Fulstone's grazing areas in the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest. Part of his allotment near Dunderberg Peak was suspended for 2003; all of it was closed in 2004.

With two more allotments in jeopardy, Fulstone sought help last year from Rep. Richard Pombo (R-Tracy), chairman of the House Resources Committee and Congress' leading critic of the Endangered Species Act.

In letters to Washington officials overseeing the Forest Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Pombo questioned the scientific foundation for the decision to restrict grazing permits over disease concerns. And he said some precautions being required of ranchers appeared excessive.

The letters, obtained by the Center for Biological Diversity through a federal public records request, later were provided to The Times.

This summer, the federal government allowed Fulstone on all of the threatened allotments, with conditions and boundary modifications designed to minimize the risk.

Humboldt-Toiyabe District Ranger Bob Vaught said that opening the areas was in keeping with Forest Service policy of allowing multiple uses on its lands and is a useful test of whether potentially deadly nose-to-nose contact between bighorn and domestic sheep can be avoided.

In an interview, Pombo said he thought he successfully prodded federal officials to keep Fulstone's allotments open. "I wanted the agencies to re-look at it and see if there is a way for both [bighorn and domestic sheep] to survive and thrive," he said.

Vaught said he was not influenced. "I never had anyone tell me I needed to do this or that. I make the decision that is best for the resources."

Moreover, officials say Fulstone could face more restrictions or closures because he has permits for at least half of the 14 grazing areas that are within 12 miles of the northernmost bighorn sightings.

That could be destructive to his business. Although his family owns 15,000 acres in Nevada and California, Fulstone said his grazing permits on 10 times that many acres of government land are integral to his annual yield of 1 million pounds of lamb and 100,000 pounds of wool.

On a recent morning, Fulstone stood among 1,500 sheep on a hilltop overlooking the Bridgeport Valley. "We were free people 60, 70 years ago," he said. "Today there are so many rules and laws for everything."

He was there to witness radio collars being put on some of his sheep. Fulstone also has agreed to frequent counts of "marker" sheep with black coats, paint or

bells and to an evacuation plan if a bighorn shows up.

Circling the herd were two sheep dogs charged with preventing strays and three bearish Great Pyrenees, who are supposed to scare off any bighorn rams.

“There is nobody with the sheep for hours a day,” said Tom Stephenson, the state Fish and Game biologist overseeing bighorn field work. “I think we are taking a risk.”

But Fulstone scoffed. “Those bighorns are not going to come down here. No way,” he said. “I want to hire a helicopter and look for the bighorn. I’ve never seen one.”

Even if the bighorns do mingle with Fulstone’s sheep, some experts question the soundness of experiments that found bighorns died of pneumonia after exposure to the pasturella bacteria carried by domestic sheep.

Dr. Annette Rink, director of the Nevada Department of Agriculture’s animal disease lab, said experiments exposed bighorns to far more of the bacteria than they would encounter on the open range.

Noting that bighorns themselves often harbor pasturella, Rink said it would be unfair and may be ineffective to ban domestic sheep from federal land.
“Ranchers and farmers feed us, and they deserve to see the best science,”
she said. “My attitude is that domestic sheep are innocent until proven guilty.”

Although there were no documented die-offs of Sierra bighorns in recent decades, state wildlife officials are investigating a pneumonia outbreak among desert bighorns in the neighboring White Mountains. They want to know whether the disease originated from a stray domestic flock, sheep at a University of California research station, or something else.

Still, state officials working on the Sierra bighorn recovery remain convinced that disease from sheep is a serious threat to the bighorns and want to err on the side of caution. That is why they believe it may be necessary to kill bighorns to stop them from carrying disease from domestic sheep back to wild herds.

“I think it’s the only option we have, given the proximity of domestic sheep to wild sheep,” said state fish and game biologist Vern Bleich, head of the bighorn recovery program.

The stakes are high.

Bringing back the bighorns to sustainable levels could take 20 years and cost upward of $20 million, according to government estimates.

A big part of this year’s $700,000 recovery budget goes to monitoring bighorns, along with domestic sheep. About 50 bighorns have been captured in nets dropped from helicopters and equipped with radio collars. And state workers hike the high terrain in the summer and ski it in the winter.

On the winding road leading through Lee Vining Canyon to Yosemite, Stephenson stopped his truck and hoisted a small H-shaped antenna. Soon a receiver emitted a muffled thumping, like a heartbeat.

There was a ram north of the canyon walls, probably near an alpine meadow known as Lamb Ewe Basin.

After more than an hour of climbing through dense mountain mahogany and talus, Stephenson swept his antenna through the air, then put it down.

“Well, we’re not hearing that rascal,” he said. “You can’t find them without radio collars&. But you can follow the signal all day and see nothing.”

Entering the lush meadow, it still was unclear which way the ram went. Then Stephenson raised the antenna again, and his face brightened. “There we go.
That’s a pretty good signal.”

Several hundred yards uphill, he whispered, “We’re getting full bars” a very strong signal.

As Stephenson crept through lodgepole pines at timberline almost 11,000 feet four bighorns suddenly materialized about 50 yards up the mountainside.

Just as quickly, they were gone.