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Route To:

Subject: Bighorn Sheep Analysis for NEPA Documents

To: Regional Foresters R-1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6

The relationship between bighorn sheep population viability and domestic sheep grazing on National Forest System lands continues to be an important wildlife and range management issue facing the Forest Service on western rangelands. Where management objectives include maintenance or enhancement of bighorn sheep populations, the potential for disease transmission from domestic sheep/goats to bighorn sheep must be addressed. To meet these objectives, forests must conduct a bighorn sheep risk assessment using the enclosed viability analysis outline.

When making decisions requiring National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) analysis, the level of analysis should be commensurate with the complexity of the proposed action. For example, due to the complexity of the situation on the Payette National Forest, a comprehensive and quantitative model-based risk assessment was completed. Results of that risk assessment contributed to the rationale for the forest supervisor's decision that a progressive reduction of suitable domestic sheep grazing was needed to support viable populations of bighorn sheep in the Hells Canyon National Recreation Area and the Salmon River Mountains. Forests that have necessary data, issue complexity, and the ability to conduct a quantitative bighorn sheep viability analysis may do so. However, a qualitative approach to NEPA analysis for bighorn sheep viability is sufficient as long as clear and reasonable rationale for the decision is displayed.

Our viability analyses should be based upon current scientific information. In addition, we should coordinate with States taking into consideration state wildlife plans. Where viability assessments indicate a high likelihood of disease transmission and a resulting risk to bighorn sheep population viability across the forest, the goal of spatial and/or temporal separation between domestic sheep/goats and bighorn sheep is the most prudent action we can use to manage risk of disease transmission.

If you have questions, please contact Anne Zimmermann, Director, WFWARP at (202) 205-1167 or Ralph Giffen, Acting Director, Rangeland Management at (202) 205-1455.

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Enclosure (below)



Four Step Outline for Conducting Bighorn Sheep Viability Analysis (At Forest Planning Level)

The following 4-step outline for conducting an analysis for bighorn sheep viability will be used to assist in standardizing qualitative risk assessment across the western states. Recent efforts by Region 2 and Region 4 to develop an interim qualitative risk assessment have been considered.

1. Gather applicable data and information from appropriate sources.*
 - In all NEPA analysis regarding bighorn sheep viability, coordinate with state fish and game agencies and consider state wildlife management plans for bighorn sheep.
 - ✓ Identify seasonal bighorn sheep occupied habitats (to infer bighorn sheep core herd home range areas).
 - ✓ Consider objectives for critical/core and non-critical/core herds.
2. Assess spatial and temporal overlap of bighorn sheep core herd home ranges with domestic sheep allotments, use areas, and driveways using, but not limited to:
 - Maps showing suitable (occupied and unoccupied) bighorn sheep habitat (including suitable source bighorn sheep summer habitat).*
 - Maps showing habitat connectivity between bighorn sheep core herd home ranges and domestic sheep allotments, use areas, and driveways (if information is available).*
 - Distances between bighorn sheep core herd home ranges and domestic sheep allotments, use areas, driveways (if information is available).
 - The proportion of rams/ewes within the bighorn sheep population that foray outside of the core herd home range and the distances they foray.
3. Assess likelihood of contact (low, moderate, high) based on spatial and temporal overlap between allotments and bighorn sheep herds.
4. Identify management practices with the goal of separation between domestic and bighorn sheep where necessary to provide for Forest-wide bighorn sheep viability.

*Step #1 and bighorn sheep habitat mapping efforts under Step #2 are in-progress or have been completed in many states by Forest Service and state wildlife biologist. Contact your regional wildlife program leader to determine what maps are currently available from the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (WAFWA) Bighorn Sheep Working Group.