



United States Department of the Interior



BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
Southern Nevada District Office
4701 N. Torrey Pines Drive
Las Vegas, NV 89130
<http://www.blm.gov/nv/st/en/fo/lvfo.1.html>

OCT 22 2013

In Reply Refer To:
(NVS00520) 6300

NOTIFICATION OF PROPOSED ACTION **LANDS OF THE NATIONAL WILDERNESS PRESERVATION SYSTEM**

Dear Interested Party:

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is required to inform all affected or interested persons or organizations about any proposed action occurring within BLM Wilderness areas. The BLM is seeking public comments on a request from the Nevada Department of Wildlife (NDOW) to conduct aerial captures of desert bighorn sheep (*Ovis canadensis nelsoni*) within six BLM-managed wilderness areas for disease surveillance in early November. The six areas are: Eldorado Wilderness, Ireteba Peaks Wilderness, La Madre Mountain Wilderness, North McCullough Wilderness, Rainbow Mountain Wilderness, and South McCullough Wilderness. Due to the time sensitive nature of the request the comment period will close October 30, 2013. Aerial captures of bighorn sheep in wilderness have been analyzed through Environmental Assessment (EA) number DOI-BLM-NV-S010-2010-0007-EA (Decision Record November 16, 2009). A Determination of National Environmental Policy Act Adequacy is being completed for these aerial health assessment captures which tiers to the 2009 EA.

Background

Bighorn sheep are highly susceptible to pneumonia, often caused by an array of bacteria mostly within the family Pasteurellaceae. Recent research indicates that bighorn sheep are especially vulnerable (i.e. morbidity or mortality) to these bacteria after first being infected by *Mycoplasma ovipneumoniae*. A number of Pasteurella species commonly occur in many wild and domestic mammals. However, in that *M. ovipneumoniae* is not an indigenous pathogen of bighorn sheep, infection is typically the result of close contact with domestic sheep or domestic goats. Bighorn ewes that survive a pneumonia outbreak generally produce weak lambs that survive only 30-90 days. Thus, a population of bighorn sheep impacted by pneumonia will experience low recruitment rates that can continue for many years.

In September 2013, NDOW confirmed a pneumonia outbreak in the River Mountains between Las Vegas and Lake Mead and it is suspected that the disease is present in the neighboring bighorn sheep herds. It is critical to determine if this event and a newly recognized disease event within the Mojave National Preserve are related to each other through the connection of the various identified mountain ranges. Health assessments will allow NDOW to determine: (1) if there is a disease event occurring in multiple identified populations; (2) if pathogens known to cause pneumonia in bighorn sheep are present in these populations; (3) if there is evidence of clinical disease in any of the identified herds, and (4) if there are genetic relatedness amongst pathogen strains between identified herds.

Proposed Action

Information obtained from this initial surveillance effort will provide a basis and direction for subsequent surveillance activities and/or wildlife management actions. NDOW plans to capture as many as 30 bighorn sheep in total, that is up to ten bighorn sheep from each of the three following mountain ranges:

Eldorado Mountains (including Eldorado Wilderness and Iteba Peaks Wilderness); McCullough Range (including North McCullough Wilderness and South McCullough Wilderness), and; Spring Mountains (including La Madre Mountain Wilderness and Rainbow Mountain Wilderness). Bighorn sheep will be captured utilizing an aerial net-gun crew and helicopter. Captured animals will be either sampled and released at the points of capture via helicopter, or collected and subsequently euthanized for necropsies.

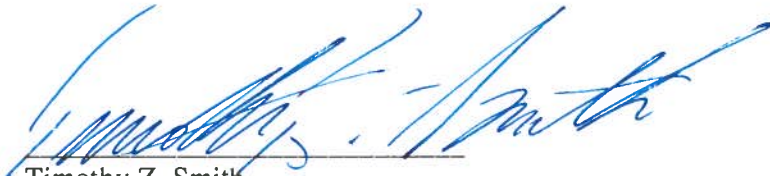
The capture crew is comprised of a pilot and several (3–4) members (gunner, animal handlers) cross-trained in different aspects of large animal captures. The aircraft (helicopter Robinson R44 or MD500D) is operated at altitudes generally below 300 feet AGL (above ground level) while the crew attempts to locate animals, and in ferrying to and from a base of operations. In capture mode, the pilot maneuvers the aircraft close to ground level in pursuit of fleeing animals. The aircraft is maneuvered alongside an animal, and at an opportune moment the pilot alters the lateral attitude of the aircraft presenting a target to the net-gunner. In essence, the net is deployed over the front (head and shoulders) of a fleeing animal such that the animal runs into an enveloping net.

Once the animal is entangled in a net, the helicopter may hover close to the ground or land briefly allowing a handler to dismount. The handler(s) works the animal out of the net and affixes a blindfold and hobbles to safely restrain the sheep. After securing the animal in a transport bag, the bag is fastened to a sling line attached to the underside of the aircraft and ferried beneath the aircraft to the base of operations. Bases of operations will be staged outside of wilderness on previously disturbed land or private land. Subsequent to health assessments of captured bighorn sheep at the base of operations, those animals not euthanized would be returned by helicopter slingload to the point of capture in wilderness. The helicopter may hover close to the ground or land briefly to allow the handler(s) to dismount, remove hobbles and blindfold and release the sheep. The proposed action would occur over 3-4 days in early November 2013, likely November 6-8, 2013. Often, the capture phase in a mountain range is completed in a single day.

How to Comment

Written comments about the proposed action should be submitted, with “Health Assessment” in the subject line, to the District Manager for consideration and use in evaluating and processing the proposed action at the address below. Written comments may be addressed to lvwilderness@blm.gov, faxed to 702-515-5023 or mailed to Sendi Kalcic, Wilderness Specialist, Las Vegas Field Office, Bureau of Land Management, 4701 N. Torrey Pines Dr., Las Vegas, NV 89130. All comments must be received by the closing date of this comment period on October 30, 2013. A final decision on the proposed action is expected by October 5, 2013 with implementation occurring immediately thereafter. If you have questions about this project, please call 702-515-5297.

Sincerely,



Timothy Z. Smith
District Manager
Bureau of Land Management
Southern Nevada District Office
4701 N. Torrey Pines Drive
Las Vegas, NV 89130