



United States Department of the Interior BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

Needles Field Office
1303 S. Highway 95
Needles, CA 92363
www.blm.gov/california



NOTIFICATION OF PROPOSED ACTION ON PUBLIC LANDS DESIGNATED PART OF THE NATIONAL WILDERNESS PRESERVATION SYSTEM

State: California

District: California Desert

County: San Bernardino

Field Office: Needles Field Office
1303 S. Highway 95
Needles, CA 92363
(760) 326-7000

Wilderness Areas: Trilobite, Clipper Mountain, Bristol Mountain, and Kelso Dunes Wildernesses

1. Intent

In the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) efforts to inform affected or interested public about proposed actions, specific emergencies, or unauthorized activities occurring within BLM Wilderness areas, the following information is provided. The California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) has requested permission to capture Desert Bighorn Sheep (DBS) within the Trilobite, Clipper Mountain, Bristol Mountains, and Kelso Dunes Wilderness. Previous surveys revealed the need to loosen radio collars installed on several Bighorn Sheep and as collars that are too tight pose a health and safety risk to the Bighorn Sheep; CDFW has requested permission to address this issue this spring rather than waiting until next fall. CDFW's Desert Bighorn Sheep surveying and collaring operations will target these collared rams, but as outlined in their proposed action, if a non-collared ram is found in conjunction with a collared ram the CDFW would like to have the flexibility to collar the additional sheep. The proposed action includes capturing Bighorn Sheep and transporting them to a processing site outside of the wilderness where they will be checked by veterinarians and technicians and then the sheep will be returned to their original capture site.

2. Background

CDFW is leading the response and working with the Mojave National Preserve (NPS) and the BLM to address the current respiratory disease outbreak in Bighorn Sheep within the California Desert District. This project is intended to continue guiding a coordinated response to the current respiratory disease outbreak and to further our understanding of demographics and movement patterns in desert bighorn within California. It is a continuation of collaring efforts that took place in 2013, 2014, and 2015 on NPS and BLM managed land. This capture will focus on recapturing rams that have been previously captured; thus, expanding the movement, disease

status, and body condition datasets for these individuals. In addition, data provided by the project may help the BLM more effectively manage DBS populations on BLM land.

3. Land Use Plan Conformance:

In accordance with Title 43 of the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) 6303.1, the proposed action is in conformance with the following approved land use plans: California Desert Conservation Area (CDCA) Plan (1980) as amended; Recovery Plan for Bighorn Sheep in the Peninsular Ranges (Recovery Plan 2000); the Wilderness Act of 1964; sections 103(a), (e), and (f) of the California Desert Protection Act of 1994; and the 1996 memorandum of understanding between CDFG and the BLM for activities in wilderness. The BLM's California Desert District will ensure NEPA compliance and conduct a minimum requirements analysis to review impacts to wilderness character before approving this project. A similar project based out of the El Centro Office in 2013 recommended similar actions as outlined below and was found to be minimum required to preserve wilderness character. Unless analysis finds significant changes a similar project plan would be expected to follow.

4. Proposed Action:

The research project includes the surveying and capturing of Desert Bighorn Sheep, subspecies *Ovis Canadensis nelsoni* (DBS) using a small helicopter, such as a MD Hughes 500D, with a contractor-supplied pilot, mugger and net gunner (capture crew). The capture crew will survey within designated search areas within the DBS ranges. Once located, target DBS will be directed into a safe area where they can be netted using a net gun. For capture, the pilot will position the helicopter close enough to the ground to allow the gunner to net, and the mugger to jump out of the helicopter to secure the target DBS. Care will be taken to ensure the DBS are not harmed during capture.

After capture the DBS will be transported via helicopter to that ranges' designated processing station, located outside of the wilderness, where a CDFW ground crew, assisted by NPS and the BLM personnel, will take physiological measurements and loosen or collar the DBS with GPS-equipped collars. A CDFW veterinarian will participate in all captures to ensure the health of all animals and attend to any health concerns. Vital signs (temperature, pulse, and respiration) will be assessed immediately upon arrival at base camp and monitored during processing. During processing, blood will be collected by jugular venipuncture in serum, EDTA, and trace mineral tubes. Blood will be assayed for chemistry and tested for a variety of disease pathogens. The ground crew will also obtain morphometric measurements, estimate age by horn rings and tooth replacement, and collect nasal swabs, hair and fecal samples. The ground crew will use ultrasonography to measure maximum subcutaneous fat thickness on the rump to calculate a body condition score. Samples will be processed as per the methods identified by the CDFW Wildlife Investigations Laboratory (WIL). Captured DBS will either have their collars adjusted to the appropriate size or be fitted with VHF and/or GPS collars and marked with numbered and colored ear tags. During processing, recorders will take information specific to each animal on capture data sheets and a capture log. Care will be taken to ensure that the collars fit snugly and do not slide up and down the animal's neck. To minimize stress during processing, the DBS will be blindfolded, hobbled, and retained in a position which allows the normal digestive processes and eructation to occur. Water will be available and used as necessary to cool the animals. After handling is complete, DBS will be transported via helicopter to their initial capture location,

where the capture crew will release the animals. Traveling distances for captured sheep are not anticipated to be longer than approximately ten miles each way. The entire operation, from capture to release is expected to take approximately 60 minutes.

The project is proposed for the Spring 2017 season. Survey and capture activities are anticipated to last approximately 4 days however, scheduling may vary slightly due to unforeseen weather or equipment problems.

Chronology of Events:

1983: CDFW conducts the first DBS captures in the Marble and Old Dad Mountains.

1984: CDFW conducts the first DBS captures in the Hackberry, Wood, Piute, and Castle Mountains.

1986-1992: Department capture efforts continue on a yearly basis.

1992: DBS translocated from the Old Dad to the North Bristol Mountains and additional animals collared in the Old Dad and Marble Mountains.

1994: California Desert Protection Act is signed and the Trilobite, Clipper Mountain, Bristol Mountain, and Kelso Dunes Wildernesses are established.

1995-1999: DBS captures in the Old Dad and Marble Mountains. Marble Mountain DBS begin to colonize the South Bristol Mountains.

2005: DBS captures in the South Bristol, Marble and Old Dad Mountains.

2013: In June, a DBS die-off is recorded in the Old Dad Mountains. By July, similar symptoms of respiratory disease are found in the Marble Mountains. In November, a widespread capture effort tests DBS in the South Bristol, North Bristol, Granite, Old Dad, Hackberry, Wood, and Clipper Ranges.

2014: Disease testing and DBS captures in Marble and South Bristol ranges.

2015: Disease testing and DBS captures in Marble, South Bristol, North Bristol, Clipper, Old Dad, Hackberry, and Wood Ranges.

2017: Request by CDFW for authorization to conduct a helicopter capture and further disease testing of DBS in Trilobite, Clipper Mountain, Bristol Mountain, and Kelso Dunes Wildernesses during spring 2017.

5. Advisory:

The BLM will conduct a Minimum Requirements Analysis to ensure wilderness character is preserved. Additionally, the BLM will conduct an Environmental Assessment as part of the process. This notice is for disclosure purposes; specific comments may be directed to Mona Daniels, Outdoor Recreation Planner at m1daniel@blm.gov



Michael W. Ahrens, Field Manager
Needles Field Office

3-7-17
Date