

BLM Colorado Southwest District Resource Advisory Council
Sheep Grazing Sub Committee
Minutes - Meeting One: Framing the Issue
March 14, 2023

Resource Advisory Council (Sub-Committee) Members:

Mark Roeber, Jim Haugsness, Jon Holst, Matt Thorpe, Steve Garchar

BLM Attendees:

Stephanie Connolly (District Manager), Jon Kaminsky (Gunnison Field Manager), Suzanne Copping (Uncompahgre Field Manager), Maggie Magee (Public Affairs Specialist), Ryan Kay (Gunnison Assistant Field Manager), Candis Fischer (Administrative Assistant)

Facilitator: Victoria Atkins

Invited Speakers: Garrett Peachey (Southern Ute Tribe), Adam Ortega (Colorado Department of Agriculture), Bonnie Brown (Colorado Wool Growers A), Terry Meyers (Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep), Jamin Grigg (Colorado Parks and Wildlife), Ben Robinson (Biologist, Ute Mountain Ute Tribe), Ernie Etchart (permittee)

Guests: Tif Rodriguez (RAC Chair), Aiden Downey (USFS Gunnison), Dan Parkinson (Colorado Backcountry Hunters and Anglers), Robyn Cascade (Great Old Broads for Wilderness), Terri Lamers, Brandon Diamond, Angela Yemma (USFS GMUG), J. Paul Brown (producer), Ashley House (Colorado Farm Bureau), Craig Grother, Jon Vonguerard

Opening and Introductions:

Victoria Atkins and Stephanie Connolly opened the meeting. Stephanie welcomed everyone to the first of six SWD RAC bighorn sheep sub-committee meetings and led the introduction of BLM employees, sub-committee members, invited speakers, and members of the public. Stephanie thanked everyone for taking time out of their busy schedules to participate.

Presentations:

Jon Kaminsky described the nature of the habitat conflict between authorized domestic sheep grazing and Rocky Mountain Bighorn and the status of the proposed 2015 Environmental Impact Statement.

Topics included:

- Anticipated Finding of Significant Impact; therefore not Environmental Assessment but Environmental Impact Statement.
- the “Purpose and Need” for action to authorize domestic sheep grazing allotments in the Henson Creek Area of the Alpine Loop -- a high country habitat for Rocky Mountain Bighorn sheep.
- a review of the public scoping process including 65 comments.
- reference to the BLM 1730 Policy for domestic sheep habitat.
- description of the “Risk of Contact” (ROC) model which does not predict pathogen transmission, but the potential for contact between domestic sheep and bighorn.
- administrative change in 2016 to take “vacant” allotments and permits off the table.
- the dilemma of keeping the proposed EIS or starting over.
- the need to update the GIS polygon maps.

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The Powerpoint presentation and its references are available in the shared document folder and online on the Sheep Grazing EIS Documents page: <https://eplanning.blm.gov/eplanning-ui/project/67519/570>.

Perspectives:

Jamin Grigg (Colorado Parks and Wildlife)

- Fourteen active domestic sheep allotments in the area (5 are BLM; 2 are USFS; 7 are shared).
- Current bighorn population is about 400 individuals.
- Described the history of Bighorn sheep in this area including a large die-off in the 1980s when approximately 1,000 animals were reduced to 40 individuals.
- CPW's current population objective is to keep levels at 400-500, which is intentionally low to reduce risk of contact events and disease events.
- This herd is considered "Tier 1" -- a native endemic herd larger than 100 animals with few transplanted animals.
- Current annual hunting licenses allow for 22 rams and 16 ewe in the S21; S23 game units (American Flats, American Lakes and Henson Creek areas).
- Wildlife economics in Colorado -- \$120,000,000 related to fishing, hunting and wildlife watching which is linked to approximately 200 jobs.
- Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (WAFWA) guidelines in 2012 include:
 - Manage for separation and eliminate overlap.
 - Best Management Practices to eliminate strays.
 - Create buffer areas with "9 airline miles" (as the crow flies) between bighorn and domestic herds.
 - Assess for risk every 10 years.
- Adult Bighorn are known to 'foray' up to 60 miles; young 10-20-30 miles.
- Mountain goats known in the Grizzly Gulch area.

Bonnie Brown (Colorado Woolgrowers Association);

- Nearly all pathogen level studies are based in forced enclosure pens.
- "M. ovi" (*Mycoplasma ovipneumoniae*) is just one of the pathogens for pneumonia.
- Also found in other species (Bison, Elk, Deer) not just domestic sheep herds; (reference to Bison transmission a CO Dept of AG report but not peer reviewed).
- USFS locally does not use the Risk of Contact model.
- The BLM 1730 policy was created without stakeholders and "poorly done."
- Questions bighorn low lamb recruitment being solely focused on domestic sheep.
- Resilience is critical.
- No comment on EIS preferred alternative.

Terry Meyers (Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep Society)

- Risk of contact is an issue across the west between domestic sheep and bighorn sheep herds.
- On grazing allotments there needs to be "effective separation."
- Summer range reflects 90% of the individuals from 'spring green' to 'heavy snow.'
- On the 3 high elevation allotments there is no separation according to the CPW maps; they share common lines.
- Existing EIS contains fatal flaws and should be addressed back to beginning. (cited Payette National Forest (Cottonwood, Idaho.)
- WAFWA's "effective separation" assumes a flatter ground.

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- “Demands” sheep stay within the allotment boundaries and if Bighorn cross those boundaries onto domestic sheep grazing, they are euthanized, if reported on time. If they are not reported, then they return to their herd and there is the risk of transfer of pathogens and possible die-off.

Adam Ortega (Colorado Department of Agriculture):

- CDA’s perspective is to evaluate the permittees individually. Each operation is different, some can accommodate new Best Management Practices (BMPs) some cannot. Each needs to be addressed individually.
- Models don’t take into account private property.
- No risk isn’t possible.

Ben Robinson (Ute Mountain Ute Tribe):

- 600,000 acres of Tribal land in Southwest Colorado; and 19,000 acres at Sapinero Mesa “Pinecrest Ranch” near Gunnison.
- No domestic sheep herds.
- Tribal members have hunted bighorn.
- The UMU Tribe supports the historic herd numbers (1,000); however...
- The Tribe’s biggest concern is a healthy rocky mountain bighorn sheep herd.

Ernie Etchardt (Domestic sheep grazing Permittee):

- Second-generation sheep operation since 1947. Sheep grazing has been active in this area for over one hundred years.
- Great area for grazing --great summer range and low predation with Value to the community. Their operation usually grazes 60 – 70 days a year on allotments.
- Without the allotments the operations would have to seek private land and in this current market it is extremely expensive if you can even find private land. Most operations cannot compete with the prices of land and house development.
- Recognize “some things have happened right.”
- ROC models are full of errors, but command such a decision-making tool for grazing. Why use such an imperfect model?
- Re: WAFWA guidelines -- many they already use; some set you up to fail.
- Information between agencies is not shared. There needs to be collaborative information to give the full aspect.
- Grazing operators are trying to follow protocol to the best of their abilities.
- Suggest a Pilot program.

Question: (J. Haugsness)What value would you put on the allotments for your operation?

Answer: Without the allotments we would most likely not be able to operate.

Question: Do you use your permit towards financial loans?

Answer: We do use our proof of permits towards business loans.

Question: (S. Garchar) Do you receive complaints with your dogs, sheep, etc., from recreation users?

Answer: With more recreation users we do get our sheep pushed around the allotments and we try to train and control our herding dogs.

Garrett Peachey (Southern Ute Tribe): Our Tribe would like to see the numbers of bighorn sheep back up to historical numbers.

- Protect and uphold a healthy Bighorn population for Ute hunting rights per the Brunot Treaty and 1990s litigated “vouchers for harvest.”
- Herds with healthy sheep and hunting opportunities for our tribe members.

Public Comment Period

Robin Cascade (Great Old Broads for Wilderness): Robin has also been a volunteer since 2020 with the Mountain Studies Institute Citizen Science program. She has observed and reported:

- 1,100 domestic sheep in the Bear Creek allotment (USFS & BLM) and only 3 miles from Bighorn sighting and along trails,
- Only encountered 3 day hikers in backcountry,
- Sheep herder camps that have been reported for litter after they have moved out.

Jay Paul Brown (USFS Permittee) Ignacio, CO:

- Tested our domestic sheep herd and found that 40% of our sheep tested positive for the pathogen.
- CPW Bighorn tests had a higher percentage than our domestic herd.
- No significant bighorn die-off in 40 years.
- Historically, domestic sheep used to be over 100,000 domestic sheep with a large number of bighorn sheep at the same time.
- Our herders have satellite phones to call authorities if nose to nose contact is observed (which we have not had any to report). Sheep herders also manage predators which in turn helps the bighorn sheep as well.
- Domestic sheep operators assist with predator control.

Question: (J. Haugsness) Will you share your testing data?

Answer: (J. Paul Brown) Yes, and also suggests research data by Dr. Maggie Highland (possible future speaker?).

Melanie Woolever (Retired USDA Forest Service): I would like to dispel some of the misinformation for the ROC modeling.

- No model is perfect, the information is the best available science to date.
- It is only one tool of many, and the current bighorn sheep scientists are improving on the model.
- There are 1000's of different strains of M. ovi in domestic sheep; Bighorn share one single string of M. ovi, currently a non-virulent strain.

Question (J. Holst) Are there any immunities to some strains?

Answer: Some domestic herds have struggled; some have 50 -90% die-off rates. The remainder then pass it off to the lambs who then cannot survive after they are weaned. Current science says eliminate the common carriers and then the herd can continue.

Suggested film: Transmission --[2022 film presented by the Wild Sheep Society of British Columbia]
[Movifree.org/film](https://movifree.org/film)

Ashley House (Colorado Farm Bureau)

- Represents 20,000 farming/ranching operations across Colorado.
- Offers producer perspective and rural economy.
- Domestic sheep grazing is important to Colorado's economic viability.
- Without grazing permits and allotments, the farming/ranching community will be devastated.
- Removal of overlap shouldn't be unilateral, but made with judicious thought and compromise.
- Decision requires collaborative effort.

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Dan Parkinson (Colorado Backcountry Hunters and Anglers)

- Dan is a retired veterinarian involved with BHA since 2016.
- Organization is dedicated to wild public lands and wildlife.
- Science indicates there is a problem with domestic sheep grazing and bighorn sheep populations, there is no question.
- DNA testing has proven the pathogens came from the domestic sheep.
- We want to see domestic sheep ranchers succeed, but we need to take care of high risk allotments.
- Other options for summer grazing land on private?
- Bottom line: Bighorns need “elbow room.”

Question (J. Haugsness): Do bighorn sheep have a lead animal that directs the herd?

A: The older ewes (maternally driven) seem to lead the herd to better feed.

Q: Effective to collar the lead ewe?

A: The bighorn sheep are moving and doing what they naturally do. Colorado Parks and Wildlife have done a good job collaring and studying, but it is dangerous and extremely expensive to collar herds. Bighorn sheep need open space, they need room to roam.

Remaining time from public comment was given back to Jon Kaminski to complete his earlier presentation.

Jon Kaminsky In our public comment period we received 65 separate comments from the public. We must address every comment in our EIS, using the comments with substance to change and advise policy. A Proposed Decision (for Alternative C) was released August 27, 2021.

Open Discussion

Question: (Jim Haugsness) Does BLM manage wildlife?

Response: No, BLM manages habitat.

Question: (Steve Garchar) Are there commonly any stray domestic sheep?

Response: (J. Grigg) Yes, and they are collected with help from agencies, or if left eaten by predators.

Question: (Steve Garchar) Are other disease outbreaks common in Bighorn? (e.g. lung worm caused Bighorn die off interpretive sign at Mesa Verde Natl. Park).

Response: (J. Grigg) Disease events show struggle with pathogens. Some eventually can recover, but the issue is constant reinfection.

Question: (Steve Garchar) Can medicated salt be put out to help when an animal is infected with the pathogen?

Response: (J. Grigg) CPW used to spread supplements, but herds are getting infected with different strains and are getting reinfected. CPW has shifted to more habitat improvement.

Question: (Steve Garchar) How much elevation change for the bighorn sheep between summer and winter migration?

Response: (J. Grigg) The bighorn sheep are a lot like elk, some herds will not travel much while some other herds will migrate great distances.

Question: (Steve Garchar) If an allotment is closed, how would the fire risks change and what weed management would need to be implemented by BLM?

A: (J. Kaminsky) Anytime a fuel is removed from an area it may influence fire behavior, but in our high elevation allotments we don't carry that risk. Cited Sapinero Fire in 1999. loss of cheat grass; gain of greater diversity of grasses and forbes.

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Question: (Steve Garchar) Can cattle be moved onto the high elevation allotments and domestic sheep be moved onto lower allotments?

A: (A. Ortega) Depends on the cows.

A: (M. Roeber) Depends on how long the cows are at high elevations. When cattle are at or above 9,000 feet in elevation for more than 30 days, the cattle will develop brisket disease. Some cattle ranchers are now breeding to develop cattle that are not susceptible to the brisket disease.

A: (Ryan Kay) A livestock conversion would need to take place and that would require an EA, federal action, NEPA and RMP. Without any cattle ranchers applying for the allotment there is no need to complete those actions.

Question: (Mark Roeber) Where do the bighorn sheep winter?

A: (J. Grigg) Most of the bighorn sheep stay on the Alpine year-round. Some will move to lower elevations, and there is a sub-group that moves all the way to Sawpit/Telluride area.

Question: (Mark Roeber) Does BLM monitor vacant allotments?

A: (R. Kay) We do not do livestock monitoring, but we do randomized inventory monitoring.

Question: (Mark Roeber) Jay Paul Brown made mention about large herds of domestic sheep being herded in the San Juans in the past, would we have access to the AUMs on older numbers on allotments?

A: (J. Kaminski and R. Kay) Yes, we can provide the information on 4 large BLM/USDA FS EIS with discussion on previous herd numbers included. (cited RMP 1993 and Landscape Analysis with Service First (BLM/USFS))

Question: (J. Haugsness) Can CPW identify useful advances in technology and/or equipment that could be used to keep the bighorn sheep in certain locations and keep separation in place?

A: (J. Grigg) CPW has looked in the market for items such as virtual fencing for the domestic sheep, but they would not be helpful to keep the bighorn sheep in place. There is just not much out to keep wildlife in one area, and then you would get into ethics of invasiveness to herd. Best tool is distance.

A: (J. Kaminski) New dog training to recognize pathogens.

A: (B. Brown) Value of 24/7 herders and dogs

A: (E. Etchart) Use of "spot Technology" for sighting Bighorn; "to haze out"; we support minimizing risk, not zero risk.

Question: (J. Haugsness) CPW -- how do you use 6-month-old data from the collars? Wouldn't the bighorn herds have already moved to new locations and run the risk of contact?

A: (J. Grigg) We use the data from long periods of time to show patterns over the years. Helicopter surveys also provide multiple years of data for maps.

Closing Remarks – Stephanie Connolly

Appreciate the tone in which we could all communicate information and our opinions in today's meeting.

Meeting adjourned.

Submitted by Candis Fischer & Victoria Atkins