

**BLM Colorado – Southwest District**  
**SWRAC Sheep Grazing Sub-Committee**  
**Meeting Minutes Part Four: Mitigation Opportunities**  
**June 13, 2023**

**Sub-Committee Members**

Present: Mark Roeber, Jim Haugsness, and Matt Thorpe (in person); Jon Holst and Steve Garchar (via Zoom).

**Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Employees Present**

Stephanie Connolly (Southwest District Manager), Jon Kaminsky (Gunnison Field Manager), Suzanne Copping (Uncompahgre Field Manager), Maggie Magee (SWD Public Affairs Officer), Candis Fischer (Administrative Assistant), and Thane Stranathan (UFO Rangeland Management Specialist)

**Public Present**

Victoria Atkins (Facilitator), Adam Ortega (Colorado Dept. of Agriculture), Bonnie Brown (Colorado Wool Growers Association), Terry Meyers (Rocky Mountain Bighorn Society), Rachel Sralla (Colorado Parks & Wildlife Area Wildlife Manager, for Jamin Grigg), Terri Lamers (permittee), J. Paul Brown (permittee), Ralph Files (citizen) (in person); Robyn Cascade (Great Old Broads), Jennifer Cram (Ridgway), and Brandon Diamond (CPW, Gunnison) (via Zoom).

**Opening Remarks and Introductions:**

The meeting was opened by Stephanie Connolly who welcomed everyone to the fourth of six Southwest District RAC sheep grazing sub-committee meetings. Victoria Atkins reviewed the ground rules and emphasized the objectives of the sub-committee – for the five members to focus on issues. Sub-committee members are encouraged to ask questions of the presenters or of members of the public as needed. Stephanie added that members of the public are encouraged to sign up for the official public comment period. Stephanie began introductions around the room and with Zoom participants and thanked everyone for their participation.

**Presentations**

Jon Kaminsky distributed copies of the “Domestic Sheep Grazing EIS – Mitigation and BMPs [Best Management Practices] by Alternative” document, as well as the USFS “2009 San Juan Landscape EA & Decision – Proposed Action Alternative (Adaptive Management)” document. Angela Yemma (USFS GMUG) was not able to attend.

Jon reviewed the BLM EIS Terms and Conditions Common to Alternative A (permittee applications); Preferred Alternative Alternative C (grazing authorized outside of bighorn core herd home range (summer range)); and Alternative D (grazing authorized outside of the overall bighorn range), and noted that Alternative B is the required No Action Alternative and existing situation.

Jon emphasized page 2 -- "Terms and Conditions to Create Effective Separation and Reduce Disease Transmission..." based on BLM Policy Manual 1730 and the WAFWA guidelines, with specific mention of:

- Item 1 -- the permittee's role in immediately notifying BLM authorized officer of any observed or reported contact of wild sheep;
- Item 2 -- the prevention of any turnout of domestic sheep or goats with observed or known respiratory infection or disease;
- Item 5 -- immediate reporting of any wild sheep sightings in proximity;
- Item 12 -- the requirement of an additional herder for more than 1000 animals;
- and on page 3
- Item 15 -- the insurance of the herder's ability to identify bighorn sheep; and
- Item 16 specific to Preferred Alternative C -- No domestic grazing on the Wildhorse Peak Pasture in the American Lake Allotment; the Engineer Pasture on the American Flats Allotments; or the Schafer and North Henson pastures on the Henson Creek Allotment.

Jon continued the document overview with a brief mention of:

- Riparian/Soil/Hydrology/Vegetation terms and conditions item 4 -- placement of salt, mineral, and supplements ¼ mile away from riparian areas;
- Threatened and Endangered terms and conditions item 5 on the Fritillary Butterfly habitat avoidance [needs snow willow]; and the Gunnison Sage Grouse special terms and conditions which apply to allotments, not in the scope of this discussion.
- Cultural and Paleontological Resources protection.

Jon reminded the group that the signed Proposed Decisions for the Domestic Sheep Grazing EIS were released on August 27, 2021 [available on the ePlanning website]. Fifteen formal protests (none from permittees) were received.

Follow-up discussions with sub-committee members included:

Q: Jim Haugsness inquired about the viability of satellite phones, the status of a communication plan, and/or protocol when domestic sheep and bighorn are "co-mingled."

A: While the monthly cost of a satellite phone is not overly prohibitive, the "challenge of the landscape" is the bigger issue.

Q: Jon Holst asked about the current option of training dogs to distinguish and alert for bighorn sheep.

A: Bonnie Brown described her own experience of dog training as time-consuming and expensive and not something every permittee can commit to.

Q: Jim Haugsness asked about the feasibility of installing signs to notify public/recreationists about the presence of domestic sheep herds.

A: Jon Kaminsky stated that information about not approaching domestic sheep guard dogs is available at the Gunnison Field Office. He wasn't aware of signs on the Alpine Loop, but it is certainly possible.

The conversation continued about any record of negative consequences and that a number of dog bites happen every year. Signs and information at trailheads are agency dependent (e.g. Handies Peak), but there are standardized Do's and Don'ts). Bonnie Brown added there is a successful Colorado Woolgrowers' brochure developed for the public about this issue.

Q: Steve Garcher inquired about the amount, timing, and type of salt used for the domestic sheep.

A: Fifty pounds of Redmond brand salt are distributed every night close to camp and in a granular form.

Q: Jon Holst asked about the Best Management Practices for multi-agency signs overlapping public information and reporting procedures.

A: Jon Kaminsky described the current BLM practice on the Silverton side of the Alpine Loop in partnership with the Mountain Studies Institute. Perhaps this can be expanded to the Hinsdale County side. Cell phone settings can include the latitude and longitude of specific photographs and that can be shared with Colorado Parks and Wildlife. Jon K. welcomes anything to improve the timeliness of responses to Bighorn Sheep observations.

A: Rachel Sralla added that once sightings are reported, there is a quick response with a phone tree, plus it's formally documented in an annual report to the state.

Q: Jim Haugsness asked Terry Meyers about the membership numbers, distribution, and activities of the Rocky Mountain Bighorn Society.

A: There are about 850 members overall with 300 or so based on Colorado's Western Slope. Individual volunteers are encouraged to help monitor, but no specific large events are planned.

Jon Kaminsky added that he does receive emails from individuals who have observed Bighorn and he knows in general the locations of herds based on radio collar data, but this is not "real-time."

Jon Kaminsky continued the presentation in the absence of Angela Yemma by referring to the USFS document "2009 San Juan Landscape EA & Decision -- Proposed Action Alternative (Adaptive Management)" which he distributed earlier in the meeting. Jon reminded the group that BLM's document is an Environmental Impact Statement (not an Environmental Assessment like the USFS) since a Significant Impact was expected. The USFS Proposed Actions are a series of practices that you can "tweak", but the BLM terms and conditions are more "thou shalt." Furthermore, there is no "ramp up" like in range monitoring; it is either yes or no considering the high altitude, Tier 1 Bighorn herd status, mountainous terrain, length of travel time, and unfenced allotments.

Q: Jim Haugsness specifically asked Bonnie Brown if anything was onerous in EIS "Option A".

A: Bonnie responded that permittees filed no protests to the EIS proposed decisions and terms and conditions, and added that BMPs are wishful thinking.

Q: Jim Haugsness asked the same question to Terry Meyers -- anything onerous in "Option A"?

A: Terry responded that the Rocky Mountain Bighorn Society formally protested the EIS because of the lack of physical separation. When a Bighorn Sheep forays up there it WILL be into a domestic allotment. He cited the WAFWA guidelines and BMPs.

Q: Jon Holst asked about how are the WAFWA guidelines “framed up” to be applied when there IS effective separation?

A: Jon Kaminsky responded with a reminder that the WAFWA guidelines document is in the reading folder. The guidelines DO work in other parts of the country. When the allotment is the same as the Bighorn habitat it is not effective separation. The BMPs only reduce risk.

Q: Jon Holst stated he is struggling with the BMPs. Can they meet the requirements of the BLM Manual?

A: Jon Kaminsky: No.

Stephanie Connolly reminded the group that the Forest Service can do livestock conversion.

Q: Stephanie then asked Rachel Sralla about the scenario: What would change if we closed the allotment? Would management numbers for Bighorn increase if other risks are still there (private land and USFS domestic sheep grazing permits)?

A: Rachel Sralla: No, it is not expected that the management numbers of Bighorn would increase to 1,000 sheep because of the ongoing foray risk and mountainous landscape challenges.

Q: Jim Haugsness asked about the risk of winter contact between bighorn and domestic sheep?

A: During winter, the mountains are still the “escape terrain”, not hay fields in lower elevations. Jon Kaminsky stated that the permits end at differing times:

- Henson Creek domestic sheep must be out by September 9;
- American Lake – September 15;
- American Flats – September 19
- Mid-elevation areas are mid- September;
- Lowest elevations (Sapinero) – October 31.

Rutting season for Bighorn is around Thanksgiving.

## **Perspectives**

Adam Ortega deferred his time to the permittees.

Bonnie Brown began by asking “What are we trying to mitigate?” Direct contact or proximity? Pathogen transmission may or may not happen. Trying to mitigate using a “scorched earth approach” is wrong.

Jon Kaminsky stated that the goal is to keep bighorn and domestic sheep away from each other.

Stephanie Connolly added that we want dialogue.

Q: Steve Garchar asked about the percentages of wild and domestic sheep being the same as historically, and commented that after over 100 years of grazing we still have wild sheep.

A: Bighorn sheep are now only in remnant areas.

Q: Jim Haugsness asked about the lifespan of domestic sheep.

A: J. Paul Brown replied that “production ewes” live for up to ten years. There are usually two rams kept per 100 ewes. This applies to both meat and wool production. Gestation lasts 145 days, with lambs usually born around May 5.

A: Bighorn sheep have a different life cycle; 10-year olds are not uncommon; 12-year old bighorns have been seen. Natural predators at high altitude include eagles and bears; few mountain lions.

Q: Stephanie Connolly asked if CPW tests bighorn ewes when they are killed.

A: Rachel Sralla: It is routine for road kills but not for successfully hunted animals.

Steve Garchar would like to see the results of the CPW tests.

Rachel Sralla: WAFWA guidelines are to minimize the risk of pathogen transmission.

Terry Meyers (Rocky Mountain Bighorn Society) stated there are additional risks to the Bighorn population from other allotments. The only way to deal with this risk is through the NEPA process, and only three allotments are being considered right now.

Focus of WAFWA guidelines:

- Distance - authorize domestic grazing use only OUTSIDE of wild sheep habitat;
- Buffers - 9 airline miles away from herds (not foraging rams);
- Best Management Practices - not to be solely relied on as not proven.

Terry distributed copies of research by Dr. Tim Schommer (Colorado State University) on the evaluation and effectiveness of BMPs. This research documents that the only significant successful results are with open and gentle terrain and where separation exists.

Terry continued with a comment of Terms and Conditions page 2, #2 – regarding the turnout of sheep with an observed or known infection or disease. In domestic herds greater than 500 sheep, the presence of infection or disease is demonstrated to be 100%, though it is not usually apparent. He takes issue with mitigation in lieu of separation. He also points out that in the CPW 2012 Herd Management Report, the maximum density is projected at 2000; the current 400-500 Bighorn Sheep number is far lower than the maximum density.

Jim Haugsness began the discussion with a “takeaway” summation of mitigation points:

- Communication or lack thereof (satellite phone option);
- Staffing – Adding a herder (one herder for 800 - 1,000) an extreme cost;
- Number of animals at a manageable size; keeps the risk of forays down.

Matt Thorpe added that the CPW is not trying to go to bio capacity.

The sub-committee broke for lunch.

### **Public Comment Period**

Terri Lamers of Snyder Ranch added her personal/professional experience with what works. Yes, dogs can distinguish between domestic sheep and bighorn, as well as goats and elk. Dogs can be aggressive. BMP of nighttime camps with dogs and sheep would prevent foray. Yes, dogs are effective.

Jim Haugsness asked Terri about the use of satellite phones or radio phones. These devices require packing across terrain, and do require charging. Cell phones don't work. J. Paul Brown added that his herders know where the signals are and inReach and contact him for resupply, etc.

J Paul Brown (USFS sheep grazing permittee) began his public remarks by sharing his experiences with dogs in camp. They chase away elk and he has never seen a Bighorn in camp. Herders keep out the Bighorn and are required to bed the herd close to camp. More herders can be more distracting to the job because they will socialize. J. Paul pointed out that there have been no die-offs in 40 years – why? He has performed testing on his herd and knows blood tests are done on collared Bighorn. He stated that the percentage of *M.ovi* are higher in bighorn. Have they developed a natural immunity? There is die-off from predators.

Bonnie Brown (Colorado Wool Growers Association) commented that domestic sheep are not the only responsible stressors to Bighorn. What is the impact of recreation on Bighorn? If you pull the domestic sheep and recreationalists increase, there is still a stress. The use of public reporting is subjective. Just a picture and a verbal report is not legitimate and could be agenda driven.

Robyn Cascade (Great Old Broads and Mountain Studies Institute): Said that she spends weeks every summer in the Henson Creek, American Flats, and American Lake areas. Given that the bighorn herd is Tier 1; that the tribes are supportive of increasing the herd size; that it is at 25% of capacity; that there is no effective separation; that she has personally witnessed bighorn in the allotments; that there are visual limitations; that communication is limited; therefore there are no reasonable mitigation measures, and the allotments should be closed. Regardless, she collectively supports grazers and the use of “buyouts” or other private grazing.

Late August last year, she observed a camp breakdown 100 yards from American Lake and a dead sheep carcass in the Henson Creek area that was not removed.

Robyn contests that recreationists are an impact here. She has only observed three people and they were not in the allotments.

In summary, Robyn urged the sub-committee to recommend an amendment to the RMP and close the allotments to domestic sheep grazing.

The public comment period was closed.

### **Open Discussion: Dialogue between sub-committee members and panel speakers**

As requested before the lunch break, the discussion was opened with a description of the Cochetopa herd located east and south of Gunnison, by CPW biologist Brandon Diamond. This

herd is located in Unit S-69 – an area of historic habitat. In the 1990s (since there were no longer Bighorn present), 25-30 animals were transplanted from the S-26 Tier 1 herd in the Taylor-Almont area.

By the year 2000, the herd was not quite as well, with periods of low lamb recruitment and impacts from hobby livestock (sheep and goats) and a big allotment to the south and west in the La Garita Wilderness.

Recently, the herd has been very well and is exceeding the habitat carrying capacity threshold. There is lots of hunting of both rams and ewes. There is active CPW management with radio collars; 25 placed in the last year with no *M.ovi* detection (yet) but some *Pasteurella* etc. disease.

Steve Garchar began the dialogue by asking J. Paul Brown about his comment regarding bedding and discussed hazing and what works best.

Q: Steve then asked Robyn Cascade if she supplied funds for buyouts.

A: Robyn said there is collaboration with other non-profits who do that work.

Q: Steve asked Brandon Diamond about the Tier 2 rating and is it different?

A: There is no genetic component. Mixing of herds is not done so much, and they are kept isolated now.

Q: Steve asked if there are transplants from other states into Colorado?

A: None known into Colorado but Colorado sheep have been moved around the state and some into Utah.

A: Terry Meyers added that WAFWA documents all the transplant locations across the West.

Q: Jon Holst asked what are the herd management plan objectives in terms of hunting?

A: For Unit S-21, the current population objective is to keep between 400-500 animals. In the early days, it was less likely to have ewe licenses. S-21 was the first in the state to hunt ewes.

Q: Jim Haugsness asked J. Paul Brown if he owned dogs?

A: J. Paul said yes, the cost is greater than \$1,000 per dog. Then also added that “H-2-A” herder contracts are annual contracts for up to 3 years, then they go back to their country of origin for 3 months. Annually the cost is \$2,300 per month plus the cost to provide herders room and board. Virtual fencing is not doable like it is with cattle. It is a different business model for sheep. Emerging technology success with 200 cattle tagged – works well with static avoidance. Real-Time data could be helpful.

Jim Haugsness brought up the agenda items for the next meeting. He feels the Communication and Response Plan (EIS Terms & Conditions p. 1, #2) should have a developed shared vision.

The July meeting agenda will include Public Outreach and Tools, as published in the Federal Register Notice. Can include signage, annual meetings, verifiable information instructions needed for Bighorn sightings, and tighten up sideboards of how to document sightings – include embedding latitude and longitude within digital photography.

Bonnie Brown wants to include the message of not encouraging people to approach sheep herds.

Jon Holst wants to try to improve the efficacy of the BMPs by shortening up the action time. The sub-committee recommendations need to include whether to move forward with the current EIS or develop more tools in an RMP amendment or start over with tools that had been removed.

Adam Ortega asked about the implementation stage and if it is feasible for BLM staffing at its current level. He is concerned there is a 'constant circle of discussion'. If we rely on the BMPs to reduce the risk, then the staff needs to make them work.

Jim Haugsness wants to develop some value statements of the grazing allotments and value statements of the Bighorn Tier 1 importance, then share them with the public.

Other tools include collaboration and sharing the outcome. At some point, the sub-committee needs to 'silence the room' and come together to organize the final product needed for the full RAC.

Stephanie Connolly closed the meeting by thanking all the participants and emphasizing that dialogue is very important and helpful.