

Bighorn sheep given room to roam

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Endangered Sierra Nevada bighorn sheep in their natural environment, steep rocky, mountainous terrain. Recent designation of critical habitat is hoped to ensure their full recovery. File photo

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After nearly a decade of research and review, the federal government has given Sierra Nevada bighorn sheep additional room to thrive and, hopefully, fully recover.

On Aug. 5, a ruling from the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) finalized designation of 417,577 acres of land throughout the Sierra Nevada range as critical habitat for the endangered animal.

The ruling, published in the Federal Register, also changes the taxonomy of the Sierra Nevada bighorn sheep from a distinct population segment of California bighorn sheep (*Ovis canadensis californiana*) to its own subspecies (*Ovis canadensis sierrae*). This signification highlights the Sierra Nevada bighorn as truly unique and individual. The final rule becomes effective Sept. 4, 2008.

Conservation activities for bighorn sheep are estimated to cost approximately \$27.4 million, but the costs directly related to the habitat designation are estimated at \$149,000 over a 20-year period.

“Designation of critical habitat does not affect land ownership, establish a refuge or reserve,” said Bob Williams, FWS’ field supervisor for the Nevada office. “Designation of critical habitat has no impact on private landowners taking action on their land that do not require Federal funding or permits.” All of the critical habitat is on public lands encompassing in the Inyo and Humboldt-Toiyabe national forests, from Olancho in the south to north of Lee Vining in Mono County.

Critical habitat, according to FWS, “is a term in the Endangered Species Act that identifies geographic areas containing features essential for the conservation of a

threatened or endangered species, and which may require special management considerations or protection.”

Sierra Nevada bighorn sheep prefer open, rocky areas, steep slopes and canyons with sparse vegetation. According to scientific data stated in the registry, Sierra Nevada bighorn thrive best in “open ground to better detect predators and allow enough time to reach steep, rocky terrain (escape habitat).” They populate the Sierra Nevada in altitudes between 4,000 and 14,000 feet.

Endangered species designation stemmed from the entire herd being on the verge of extinction at the turn of the last century. First diseases then predation nearly wiped out the herd. In 1999, the entire Sierra Nevada bighorn herd was estimated at being less than 100.

On April 20, 1999, the FWS asked for an emergency designation of bighorn sheep as endangered until the normal listing process could be complete. In January 2000, a final rule was published listing the sheep as endangered, but there were insufficient findings to rule for a designated critical habitat. During the process to designate habitat, it was found that the Sierra Nevada bighorn was wrongly listed in its taxonomy.

In July 2003, a Draft Recovery Plan for the Sierra Nevada bighorn was made available with a comment period being reopened in October of that year.

In December 2005, a complaint filed by the Center for Biological Diversity accused the FWS of failing to designate habitat for the endangered subspecies within the time limits pursuant with the Endangered Species Act. An extended public comment period during this time netted a total of 28,181 comments, the majority in favor with only 12 oppositions. In June 2006, an agreement was made between the FWS and the center to have a proposal and final determination of the critical habitat by July 17, 2007.

One of the concerns stated in the peer review of the draft are diseases from domestic sheep and goats, particularly a pneumonia-like infection innocuous to the domestic sheep that carry it. It spreads rapidly among a herd and can travel from herd to herd as males have been known to travel up to 35 miles during mating season.

Infection from domestic sheep is thought one of the major causes of Sierra Nevada bighorn depletion past and present and the peer review recommended that it should be specifically addressed in the draft.

The FWS commented on this issue by stating that the danger of disease is a threat, but “not strictly a habitat-related threat,” and would be addressed by federal agencies under the Endangered Species Act.

However, both the California and Nevada departments of agriculture stated in the registry that there is still “incomplete agreement in the scientific community” about disease transmission between domestic sheep and bighorn. Nevada DOA, even recommended suspension of the designation until “a scientific basis has been established for disease transmission” between the two sheep.

The College of Agriculture at the University of Nevada, Reno stated in the registry that high-intensity grazing by domestic sheep helps maintain forage production and the regrowth is more palatable and nutritious for bighorn. FWS is recommending the removal of domestic sheep from all allotments where contact cannot be prevented.

“Nobody is opposed to bighorn,” said Inyo and Mono County Agricultural Commissioner George Milovich of the recent designation. He said his concern is what impact the designation may have on the future of grazing allotments. He did not want to see this

designation result in the closure of grazing areas and the closure of businesses that operate in those allotments.

“Public interest is clear ... They want the Sierra Nevada bighorn protected,” said Daniel Patterson, ecologist, biologist and director for the Southwest division of Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, or PEER.

Patterson explained that the mapping and designating of critical habitat is essential for “the protection and full recovery” of Sierra Nevada bighorn in that it will assist local land managers, such as Bureau of Land Management, in exactly where to focus recovery efforts. It is the responsibility of local land management to maintain the stability and integrity of those habitats like issuing grazing allotments or prescribed burning in areas specifically designed to improve critical habitat.

It is also the responsibility of local land managers whether to designate a portion of wilderness as sensitive areas and limit hiker travel and stock use. These kind of restrictions are currently in affect in the California Bighorn Sheep Zoological Area in the High Passes area between Big Pine and Independence. Cross-country travel and many peaks have limited annual access or are closed altogether to human and domestic animal traffic from Baxter Pass to the George Creek and Mount Williamson trails.

This current designation does not put any new limitations on the land, but shows exactly where to focus recovery efforts.

“This issue codifies the direction everyone’s been going,” said Paul McFarland of Friends of the Inyo. His only complaint was that the habitat designations did not allow for protections in between herds for interbreeding with other herds. “Sheep need to be able to roam ... The entire range is bighorn habitat.”

McFarland cited one particular ram that traveled from Lee Vining to Bloody Mountain, a few miles southeast of Mammoth.

McFarland also said that most of the sheep ranchers on the East Side were “model permittees” but was also quick to point out the devastating implications of bighorn contact with domestic sheep, calling it a “potential for a herd-erasing epidemic.” But he also said that bighorn and domestic were not “incompatible” as long as diligent efforts are made to manage the situations.

“Limiting high-altitude grazing benefits not only bighorn sheep, but higher elevation areas in general,” such as vegetation and soil degradations, McFarland added.

Supporters of the designation for Sierra Nevada bighorn say it may have come just in time. On Aug. 11, the Bush Administration ruled on a decision to take the responsibility of deciding whether a project, like a new road, will impact endangered species out of the hands of FWS and leaving the decision up the agency heading the project.

For example, the decision of whether an endangered species will be impacted by a new road project will be decided by the Department of Transportation and not by an independent review of scientists.

Currently 300 Sierra Nevada bighorn sheep are roaming the range of light.