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## **\*\*PRESS RELEASE\*\***

### **MONTANA SHEEP PRODUCERS VIEW OF BIG HORN CONSERVATION**

*By Dave McEwen, Montana Wool Growers Association*

Hardly a month goes by without a new article about how domestic sheep will destroy Montana's wildlife population and quite possibly the entire Western US ecosystem unless they are eliminated. Over the past 40 years, domestic sheep have mostly disappeared from federal forest allotments in Montana, originally set up for "multiple use". At the same time, demographic trends have seen a good portion of Montana's traditional winter ranges subdivided and paved over. Wildlife are now forced onto smaller areas of private land for their winter feed, increasing the tension between private landowners, sportsmen and women and FWP. Mounting bureaucratic regulations brought on by lawsuits, are forcing management decisions of our state's wildlife into the hands of federal courts and away from local control. These regulations also make it difficult for ranchers to continue to graze their federal allotments. "Good!" some people will say. In the long term, the loss of grazing rights will exacerbate the subdivision of even more open rangeland as these family ranches become unsustainable.

The current disputes over bighorn sheep are case in point. Montana has a Bighorn Conservation Strategy agreed upon by the state and interested parties. The plan calls for 5 new herds to be established over a 10 year period. The main issue in finding new ground for bighorn herds is private landowners near potential release sites are intimidated by future regulations that may be imposed on them. Groups are finding ways around the arduous task of listing species through the Endangered Species Act by using the "minimum viable population" clause in Forest Service policies. While bighorns are not a listed species and are still hunted across the west, lawsuits are driving single species management on federal lands. Ultimately the bighorn/domestic sheep conflict will be tame compared to the coming free ranging bison/cattle conflict.

Montana needs to make a decision on whether to manage bighorn herds as a group or as isolated herds. Managing bighorns as a group, allowing population flow, and contact with domestic livestock will ultimately evolve a robust, healthy gene pool across the bighorn population. We know from past sampling that current bighorn herds carry the *Pasteurella* bacteria. Even if all domestic sheep are removed from the state, Montana will continue to experience bighorn sheep die-offs. With disease vectors already in the population, all that's needed is an extremely severe winter like 2010 to weaken the herds and make them susceptible. The Sun River herd experienced a die-off that winter which reduced numbers from over 900 to under 500. This herd is struggling to regain its footing. However, those remaining will have been exposed and develop resistance to the pathogens. It is important to note there have been no domestic sheep grazing anywhere near the Sun River herd for several generations. Instances like this are never widely reported.

The take home message here is "coexist". Bighorn sheep and domestic sheep each play an important role in our Montana landscape. Bighorn sheep are part of our national heritage. They represent a time when the United States was truly wild. Ironically it is domestic sheep providing a renewable, sustainable living for ranchers who will help preserve the open space necessary for Bighorn sheep to survive.