

**BLM Colorado Southwest District
SWRAC Sheep Grazing Sub-Committee
Meeting Minutes for Part Five:
Best Management Practices and Public Outreach Tools
July 18, 2023**

Sub Committee Members

Present: Jim Haugsness (in person); Steve Garchar and Matt Thorpe (via Zoom)

Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Employees Present:

Stephanie Connolly (Southwest District Manager); Jon Kaminsky (Gunnison Field Manager); Suzanne Copping (Uncompahgre Field Manager); Candis Fischer (SWD Administrative Assistant), David Gauthier (SWD Administrative Officer), and Elizabeth Dawson (SWD Assistant District Manager) (in person); Maggie Magee (SWD Public Affairs Specialist) via Zoom.

Public Present:

Victoria Atkins (Facilitator), J. Paul Brown (Colorado Wool Growers), Terry Meyers (Rocky Mountain Bighorn Society), Terri Lamers (Snyder Ranch), Ralph Hilmes, and Angela Yemma (U.S. Forest Service) (in person); Les Owen (Colorado Dept. of Agriculture) (via Zoom); Michael Saul (Western Watersheds) and Raven Finegan (Rep. Boebert's office) appeared briefly.

Opening remarks and Introductions:

After resolving technical sound issues for Zoom participants, the meeting was opened by Stephanie Connolly, who welcomed everyone to the fifth of six Southwest RAC sheep grazing sub-committee meetings. Stephanie began with introductions around the room and with Zoom participants. Stephanie thanked everyone for their participation, reviewed the agenda, and added that members of the public are encouraged to sign up for the official public comment period. Victoria Atkins began the meeting with a quick update on the last four sub-committee sessions and asked what sub-committee members need in order to make a recommendation to the RAC.

Sub-Committee Discussion

Jim Haugsness began with a statement that his eyes are now open to this serious problem. When he joined the Sub-RAC, he had no experience in range management or grazing. The issue facing bighorn sheep is a serious problem and some of the of the issues could involve:

Communication - Between sheep grazers and BLM/Colorado Parks & Wildlife (CPW) when a bighorn is exposed to domestic sheep.

Technology - Jim asked whether some type of tracking device could be utilized either on bighorn or domestic sheep – some type of partnership with permittees to supply tracking devices – and whether other groups such as Rocky Mountain Bighorn Society could provide tracking devices for the bighorn. All tracking devices could be monitored

and if the sheep are getting close to the same area, they could be separated before they get too close.

Education - Jim wondered whether the BLM could share educational aspects with the herders.

Jim then reviewed the sub-committee goals:

- To identify what this group is trying to manage with information from Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW), Tribes, Friends of the bighorn and the sheep grazers whose livelihood is affected. Jim noted that CPW is responsible for the bighorn Sheep and BLM is responsible for the land management and noted the difference in magnitude between 1500 and 400-500 bighorn.
- To respond to the EIS specific Terms and Conditions including the pre-grazing meeting and the Communications and Response Plan. Noting that
 1. Communication is critical for safety as well (e.g. the recent bear attack to one of J. Paul Brown's herders);
 2. Regarding technological monitoring of both domestic and wild sheep with a tracking device, Jim wants to see some cost sharing or partnerships including assistance from the Rocky Mountain Bighorn Society to increase the efforts of keeping the domestic sheep and bighorn sheep apart.

Q: Jim asked how the BLM determines whether the permittee is meeting the terms and conditions of their permit.

A: Jon Kaminsky responded that there is intention and practice. The BLM begins with trust and then verifies as possible within the limited budgets and staff. There are currently only two Rangeland Management Specialists (in Silverton and Gunnison Basin), but other resource specialists may make observations when working in the area. If there is non-compliance, then there are avenues to correct. BLM staff currently cannot cover/monitor the entire area annually. Past performance is weighed in.

There is not a lot of contact directly with the herders; BLM does not contact them in the field. Instead, permittees are called directly in order to follow their 'chain of command'.

What the RAC saw last fall on the field trip matches the issues to resolve (e.g. the process of moving domestic sheep herds).

A: Matt Thorpe added that the response time to a reported bighorn foray is about 12 hours -- "as fast as we can."

Q: Jim Haugsness asked if it would be possible to have a Spanish speaker on the BLM staff in an effort to more successfully communicate with the herders?

A: Jon Kaminsky responded that it is possible, but not likely. That is a bigger issue in this current environment. The BLM struggles to find qualified employees for open positions and then to add bilingual requirements might make it even harder.

A: Stephanie Connolly noted that other BLM staff are out there too; that there are more eyes and ears than just the range management specialists. "The staff is 'networked in' on public lands to help each other," (e.g. there is one OHV Ranger; 17 field staff plus seasonals).

Q: Jim Haugsness asked J. Paul Brown if there is any possibility one of his Peruvian contracted herders could work with the BLM in the off-season to educate?

A: J. Paul Brown said that it would not be feasible for a rancher to pay for time not herding. Brown stated that he is working with the Forest Service for satellite-connected collars with signals twice a day. The herders also have a satellite-connected "orange box" that, with the push of a button, alerts the permittee if a bighorn is seen. [This may be a Garmin PLB (Personal Locator Beacon) and Satellite Messenger.] The Forest Service has collared some of his domestic sheep and twice a day the satellite pings with a notification on the location of the herds. There are also a few collared bighorns for location comparison.

A: Best Management Practices include the radio-collared bighorn and monitoring locations.

Q: Jim Haugsness noted that there are other groups who go out and look for the bighorns on a scheduled basis and asked Terry Meyers whether his group (RMBS) could set up that type of thing and report potential close encounters. He then asked Terry what he thought of the communication discussion.

A: Terry responded that RMBS does not have the resources or people to be able to constantly monitor bighorn sheep without a collar on every one of them and noted that pathogen/disease transmission is still a risk even if mitigated.

Q: Jim Haugsness asked about the BLM working with volunteers from RMBS or getting grant writers.

A: Jon Kaminsky referred to the current volunteer program with the Mountain Studies Institute on the "Animas Side" and noted that money is not the issue and he is open to ideas. Because of the constant travel of bighorns, it would be virtually impossible to monitor unless each and every animal is wearing a collar, and then you must take into consideration the amount of time it takes for CPW or BLM to report; by then they could have already had contact and then separated.

A: Terry Meyers responded that RMBS funds the Mountain Studies program of citizen science. To be completely present, the situation needs the equivalent of 24/7 herders and that is not their role. Terry also elaborated on the misunderstanding that the bighorn sheep are all together. A large group is greater than 20 bighorns and the herds are dispersed. It is not realistic to know where all the bighorns are.

A: Jon Kaminsky added that 400 animals could equal 40 separate groups and vary also with animal behavior factors.

Steve Garchar commented that with modern cell phones and apps like Google Translate, language differences should not be an issue. He observed that the BLM is doing a good job and he does not agree with the language barrier/communication issue. Translation services are available on cell phones now. He wondered whether BLM staff could monitor sheep using GPS trackers and Google Earth-type systems or drones. He also noted that there seems to be a lack of technology in tracking animals and the BLM should partner with law enforcement agencies to improve location information.

Q: Steve Garchar asked what the overall health of the bighorn herds is and whether it would be possible to improve herd health and control herd movement by attracting them with salt and minerals away from the allotments.

Q: Steve also asked whether dead bighorn sheep are tested and wondered why hunted animals immediately tested like deer and elk are tested. He asked whether the BLM could look at transferring the allotments or doing livestock conversions to lower risk. He also mentioned that some of his previous questions to CPW have only been answered with 'I don't know' and he has not received any promised follow-up. (He included examples including the number of contacts per year, the status of samples taken, and transplant history.)

Q: Are there tests done from road kill or hunted sheep? Why aren't all the tests done during the hunting process with tags and restrictions? Why are not samples also required and results readily available? From his Dolores County Commissioner perspective, he sees the value of multiple use; it is needed for survival.

A: Matt Thorpe noted that, as someone who has tried to interact with the herders, when wardens show up it can be intimidating. CPW has some Spanish-speaking officers, but not many. He commented regarding the language barriers with domestic sheep herders that the translate apps make it easier. He has personally interacted with the herders, but is also aware of the hesitancy and cultural perceptions of approaching law enforcement officers.

Matt agrees with J. Paul that it is valuable to have collars on domestic sheep (this is not a BMP). Bighorn sheep are dynamic on how they use the landscape. It costs \$5,000 to collar a bighorn. Citizen science can be informative and it should have a consistent process, with safeguards built in and data vetted and verified. As J. Paul mentioned, collars on the domestic sheep can be a very valuable resource. We usually know where our domestic herds are, but we almost never know where the bighorns are. It costs around \$5,000 to collar a bighorn. There really isn't enough funding to collar domestic and bighorn herds. Ideally, we need the public to report, but with actual evidence – pictures, locations, pins. Addressing the question of testing dead bighorns: testing samples are required to be very fresh. Often times CPW isn't notified of a kill on the road in time to get the testing done.

Matt apologized for not getting data back to Steve and the other Sub-Committee members and will re-send Jon Kaminsky the summary of bighorn interactions, including the actual number of euthanized foraging bighorn. Regarding testing of bighorn roadkills, fresh samples are needed for accurate testing. Most roadkill are so far gone ("melted down carcasses") and not viable for sampling. Matt responded to Steve Garchar that the issue with salt and minerals is that it is considered too much of a danger for the animals to congregate in one spot.

Q: Matt Thorpe then inquired about the bigger landscape and the status of other vacant allotments where there are no conflicts with bighorn. Were they removed from consideration?

A: Jon Kaminsky responded that Grizzly Gulch is a vacant grazing allotment, but is not a good choice for domestic sheep. Four or five other vacant allotments are adjacent, including Upper Burrows, Lower Burrows, and Red Cloud.

Q: Stephanie Connolly asked if there is anything to broaden the geographic area of decision?

A: Jon Kaminsky suggested that looking bigger might reduce the risk. The conversion from cattle to sheep option was taken out of the EIS. And in the ten years since the EIS was written, things have changed on the ground.

Q: Jim Haugsness asked if transportation costs to the domestic sheep permittees are a factor when a change is considered?

A: Jon Kaminsky responded that the NEPA analysis considered trailing versus trucking. All three allotments use various methods for the movement of sheep including truck movement and stock driveways along the ridgelines (trailing).

Q: Jim Haugsness then asked J. Paul Brown if he factored in animal transport?

A: J. Paul responded that it depends on the locations of your home base and your allotments. He also stated that he never buys sheep. He wants them born and raised on the allotments so they will “know where their home is.” And therefore, using other vacant allotments (like Pagosa Springs) would not work for them.

Q: Jim Haugsness asked if a home base location is considered in the EIS?

A: Jon Kaminsky responded that in order to receive a grazing permit you have to show BLM that you have base property. Looking at vacant allotments and bringing them into the EIS or a RMP supplement can happen down the road. NEPA analysis includes assessing if the proposal will work for the domestic sheep operation. When an allotment is vacant is the time to look at it so it does not affect everyone’s business. Jon reminded the group that not all allotments are the same. Generally 11,000 to 12,000 ft. elevations are generally not a consideration for cattle (e.g. “brisket disease”).

Steph Connolly asked for a pulse check on potential allotment closure.

- Matt Thorpe responded that closure was ok if other places are available for the domestic sheep.
- Steve Garchar stated that all options are available; closure is a last resort.

Terry Meyers noted that the EIS covers seven allotments, but we are currently discussing only three—which are the highest risk to bighorn. It is an option for the BLM to pick and choose different alternatives for each allotment, e.g. you can select alternative E for these three allotments. Do you have an RMP that allows this?

A: Jon Kaminsky responded that the BLM always analyzes the no-grazing alternative for a sideboard. In the case of the EIS, however, in 2018 the ability to amend the RMP was removed from the EIS so we cannot close allotments at this time. Alternative D is the most bighorn conservation-minded alternative available. The 2015 map of the general habitat was updated in 2019, but the polygons and zones have already moved around in the four years since.

Q: Terry Meyers asked whether the BLM can issue some decisions and wait on others?

A: Stephanie Connolly answered yes, the BLM can issue multiple decisions.

A: Jon Kaminsky added that the Gunnison sage-grouse document is also in the same area.

Q: Jim Haugsness – Regarding the Alpine Loop, is there a risk of contact between recreationists and semi-trucks (hauling sheep)?

A: Jon Kaminsky stated that there is “an explosion of use on the Alpine Loop.” Last year there were over 400,000 individual vehicles. There are also recreationists and trailing conflicts. Everyone is feeling squeezed now. Too many people on the trails and a constant stream of ‘thru hikers’.

Q: Jim Haugsness asked Terry Meyers - Does recreation use affect bighorn?

A: Terry Meyers - Absolutely! The number two impact to bighorn sheep is recreation. For example, the hammered areas are avoided by bighorn as evidenced by collar data, including the lambing areas.

Jim Haugsness recommended another pulse check for the Sub-Committee. With a “firehose of information,” the sub-committee needs to define the problem, develop alternatives, and provide an executive summary for the new RAC members.

Jon Kaminsky - Focus on what you don’t know and need.

Public Comment Period

J. Paul Brown

As a permittee from Ignacio, he does not know the three targeted allotments very well, but when a permit is closed the BLM needs to look at the local economy. Multiple use has been brought up and there are ways to minimize conflict. If we can’t test dead animals, we need to test more live animals.

- Local economies are affected by closing or limiting grazing permits.
- Follow the concepts of multiple use so that everyone works together to use BMPs as ways to minimize sheep conflicts.
- Test the bighorns when collaring.
- Instead of euthanizing forayed bighorn rams, why not capture them to test and study and expand the science?
- Stated a bighorn tested years ago had a higher percentage of *M. ovi* than domestic sheep. J. Paul wonders if one of the reasons why there has been no die off in 40 years is that there is immunity.
- He has spoken with Utah folks (near Zion National Park?) where there are no die-offs of adjacent bighorn and domestic sheep. We should piggyback on their science and experiences.
- Maybe the problem has solved itself.
- Let’s work together to put this to bed.

Terri Lamers

- Appreciates the time and investment of everyone involved.
- Since there hasn’t been a major die off in years, is there any data that shows accurate sickness rate for herds?

- How does the Georgetown, CO bighorn population compare?
- Colorado Wool Growers have a MOU with BLM and CPW for identifying a mutual desire to minimize impacts to bighorn. They are willing partners.
- She appreciates the BMPs.

Terry Meyers

- BLM Manual 1730 states there must be a high degree of confidence.
- We are talking about BMPs and effective separation as defined by BLM on high allotments. There is no way to continue grazing on high allotments and keep effective separation.
- What is the efficacy of the BMPs mentioned previously?

The public comment period was closed and the sub-committee continued discussions, including with J. Paul Brown, Terri Lamers, and Terry Meyers.

Q: Jim Haugsness asked J. Paul Brown and/or Terri Lamers what the conditions that would close your domestic sheep business?

A: Terri's business is dependent on corrals and facilities for trucking from Norwood to Gunnison. They unload on private property. She grazes in the Mesa, Cold Springs and Cochetopa allotments. Poison plants like larkspur are an issue. Terri sees no issue with the BMPs but she is in a very different terrain.

A: Jon Kaminsky added that for Terri the BMPs are appropriate management for the situation. In response to Jim Haugsness, Jon Kaminsky stated that there is nothing in the BMPs that say there is no risk or that makes separation happen. Effective separation cannot be achieved without distance.

Jon Kaminsky also asked who is missing from the room? Where are the other formal protesters?

Resolving protests will ultimately go to an administrative law judge.

Jon Kaminsky further observed that this situation is a collision of factors including terrain, no fences and a limited grazing season. The Risk of Contact model doesn't apply here because bighorn are already inside the allotment.

Jim Haugsness appreciated that CPW is controlling the herd size. Quantitative analysis of 400 animals suggests a high, high risk. In some cases the BMPs are effective but not in this highest of high risk.

Q: We are missing the downward trend of bighorn populations. What are the estimated numbers historically?

Steve Garchar noted that domestic sheep grazing has been ongoing for 100 years and there is still a Tier 1 herd and now hunting of ewes. Why are there no transplants from this herd to increase bighorn elsewhere? Steve wants to see more technology like drones in use to monitor sheep locations.

Matt Thorpe elaborated that for *M. ovi* testing fresh samples are needed and that anytime we lay hands on bighorn sheep we test.

In terms of forays, CPW is not willing to risk the whole herd by just sampling the foraying ram, collaring, etc. then returning to the herd. It is hard to find the exact animal or lone animal in this big landscape. Sheep surveys both with helicopter and ground sometimes don't find any. In the past a "Johnny Appleseed" approach was used for transplanting bighorn. Current practice has shifted because of not wanting to move strains including potential transfer of *M. ovi* and or exposure to a new strain into the new herd.

Part II - Public Outreach Discussion

Q: Jon Kaminsky asked about the 'go or no go' methods shown in the film *Transmission*.

A: Matt Thorpe responded that CPW has to ship samples to Fort Collins for processing.

A: Terry Meyers stated that the field lab shown in The film *Transmission* is used in very specific situations and not generally done in an area where there is low lamb recruitment.

Jon Kaminsky stated we know "They are there." It is an open range with nothing preventing animals from moving. No Fences. And regarding recommendations "everything is on the table. Everyone has skin in the game." Some BMPs need clearer boundaries.

Regarding the use of drones in monitoring – how would this be implemented and who moves what and where?

Terry Meyers wondered who bears the cost of drones and monitoring? Who pays for it?

Q: Steve Garchar to Matt Thorpe – what is a "melted down carcass?"

A: Matt Thorpe described it as old and dried out and exposed to the elements for a week or more. bighorns are not usually found like this and added that nasal swabs are done on live animals.

Q: Steve Garchar asked specifically if successful bighorn hunters could be required to have the animals tested?

A: Matt Thorpe responded that it is not required now. They would need to bring the head in within five days (skinned out or not). Samples can also be taken out of lung tissue. The Colorado State Parks and Wildlife Commission would need to approve this requirement. Their lab folks would also question the timeframes and utility of sampling hunted animals.

Les Owen offered insight on state testing:

- Nothing the state vet does in response to reportable diseases fits this situation.
- There is nothing now performed to widely test domestic sheep and testing before sending sheep to the grazing allotments would stress the pregnant ewes.
- Department of Agriculture doesn't have the resources to test every domestic herd prior to turnout. You will find a percentage of *M. ovi* in any domestic sheep herd. The additional stress to the bighorn to complete testing would have an impact.
- What would be the gain, it is shown that other species carry the pathogen, there is no way to eliminate the risk. Even if you removed every domestic sheep from the allotments, you would still have a risk to the bighorn sheep, they can get sick from the environment.

Q: Jim Haugsness asked Les Owen whether the field testing demonstrated in the *Transmission* film was doable with time?

A: Les Owen replied that maintaining a close domestic herd is critical for health, but *M. ovi* is still present. It is 100% endemic to the environment.

A: Terry Meyers added that in the (Canadian) film the domestic herd's nasal passages were flushed for five consecutive days, not an easy task for large herds. And the medication used is not legal in the US.

Q: Jim Haugsness asked Les Owen if BLM closes allotments, is there still bighorn risk?

A: Les Owen replied that if all the domestic sheep were gone in Colorado, there would still be *M. ovi* present in bighorn.

A: Terry Meyers added that there is potential to spread new strains from domestic sheep and an associated cumulative effect.

A: Jon Kaminsky added that there is interspecies attraction between domestic sheep and bighorn. *M. ovi* is not residual outside of animals; relatively close proximity is needed for transmission.

A: Matt Thorpe responded that it is important to take into account other issues and factors like range conditions and the effect of drought.

Q: Steph Connolly asked Jon Kaminsky what public outreach the Gunnison Field Office has conducted?

A: Jon Kaminsky responded that NEPA is a disclosure process, not a hypothetical one. He noted that when the BLM goes into the NEPA process, the public is encouraged to participate. A Federal Register notice goes out for an EIS. We collaborate with partners like CPW and provide public comment periods. BLM responded to valid comments and then we came out with the Final EIS and the Proposed Decision was released in August 2021. Formal protests were received with facts distilled to 15 issues. At this point, we receive more comments/protests. Now we sit in front of the RAC looking for recommendations. So, yes -- there has been a lot of public participation -- "robust" through the years of public meetings.

Q: Do we have any blind spots? We consult regularly with the three Ute tribes (Southern Ute, Ute Mountain Ute, and Northern Ute).

Q: Jim Haugsness asked what permittees are affected by this decision and is it important enough for them to participate?

A: Jon Kaminsky replied that the only two permittees affected by the three allotments being discussed are Juan Indas and the Leonards (Poverty Mesa LLC) and he will ensure they are specifically invited to attend the final meeting (six).

Closing Remarks

Stephanie Connolly closed the meeting by expressing appreciation for the time and energy of all attending and noted that the next and final meeting of the Sub-Committee would be held on Tuesday August 15, with final recommendations presented to the full RAC at their October 11 meeting in Gunnison.