



OPPOSE PROVISIONS THAT HARM BIGHORN SHEEP

Interior Appropriations Bill Would Devastate Bighorn Sheep Populations

Background:

A century ago, wild bighorn sheep thrived in the United States, numbering in the millions. But settlement left the various bighorn populations of the West nearly extinct. By 1960, there were no more than 8,000 bighorns remaining in the United States. While a number of factors lead to this precipitous decline, including predation and habitat fragmentation, contact with domestic grazing sheep was likely the biggest contributing factor. This is because bighorns lack immunity to deadly pneumonia, which domestic sheep carry. Only in the last decade have federal and state agencies begun to initiate proactive measures to isolate domestic sheep operations from bighorns. But even under the best circumstances, domestic sheep have proven difficult to contain in the rugged West. In one incident in 2009, bighorn contact with domestic sheep in the mountains of Nevada resulted in the deaths of 88 bighorns and one mountain goat – those 88 bighorns represented one-third of the entire population in that particular region.



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With that as a backdrop, the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management, working with state fish and wildlife agencies, tribes, conservationists, and sportsmen, have redoubled efforts to restore bighorn populations. Measures have included transplanting bighorns into new areas, instituting controlled hunts to selectively manage populations, and implementing safeguards to reduce conflicts with livestock grazing operations. This intense level of engagement has proven to be remarkably successful. In fact, these measures have nearly tripled the bighorn population from their low numbers in the 1960's.

However, the *FY 2012 Interior-Environment Appropriations Bill* contains two riders that, combined, would undo this work and eliminate nearly all protections for bighorn sheep, some subspecies of which are threatened or endangered. The riders would do this to benefit a handful of sheep ranchers, mainly in Idaho, who do not want to implement measures to reduce conflicts between their grazing sheep and bighorns in the Hells Canyon National Recreation Area of Idaho and Oregon.

The Riders:

Section 120 would exempt a certain type of grazing permit called a “mobile permit” from complying with the National Environmental Policy Act. Mobile permits allow ranchers to graze their sheep or cattle on a broad area going from one point to another (“trailing”) as opposed to grazing on a discrete piece of land, or allotment, for a fixed time. Because mobile permits allow grazing animals to move over large swaths of land, domestic sheep are more likely to come into contact with bighorns, carrying and transmitting diseases that kill these iconic species.

Section 442 would prohibit agencies from taking any steps to manage bighorn sheep if such actions would interfere with the grazing of domestic sheep on federal lands. This provision would prevent the Forest Service and the Fish and Wildlife Service from implementing Endangered Species Act protections for threatened and endangered subspecies of bighorns. Further, it would undermine the decades of work and millions of dollars that have gone into restoring bighorn populations in the West. On a fairness level, this rider amounts to an earmark given that it will economically benefit a select few ranchers, placing their interests far and above the greater good. In essence, it is a handout to operations that could not survive without gross political intervention on the part of Congress.

Economic Impacts:

In jeopardizing the viability of bighorns, this provision would drastically reduce tourism revenues in western states. Indeed, healthy bighorn populations generate millions of dollars from hunting and recreation in the west. Wildlife viewing in Idaho alone produces more than \$81 million in food and lodging annually. Last year, nearly 30,000 visitors signed in at the Hells Canyon National Recreation Area, most of who came to view wildlife, including bighorns. Further, this provision would decrease revenue produced by licenses to hunt bighorns. To date, bighorn hunting permits, which often sell for more than \$100,000 a piece, have produced over \$3.2 million in the tri-state region. Lastly, these provisions would render significant past investments in wild sheep recovery ineffective. The public has dedicated a great deal of money to wild sheep recovery, which will go to waste if these special interest earmarks are included in the final appropriations bill.



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