



BIGHORN SHEEP IN DOMESTIC SHEEP GRAZING ALLOTMENTS

In the Payette National Forest in Idaho, the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) prohibited 13,000 sheep from grazing on their historic grazing allotments, driving one ranch out of business entirely and drastically reducing the operations of three others. The declared reason for this reduction was an obscure regulation of the National Forest Management Act allegedly requiring each national forest to maintain “minimum viable” populations of all vertebrate species found there.

Forest Service officials continue to make decisions on the future use of “*high risk*” allotments grazed by domestic sheep using the Payette decision, even though only 3 percent of federal sheep allotments overlap with occupied bighorn habitat. At a minimum 400,000 domestic sheep, and the families who raise and care for them, may be affected. The impacts are serious, affecting not only sheep operators and their employees, but meat packing plants, woolen mills, and even the military, which purchases twenty percent of the nation’s wool production to help equip America’s service men and women.

- Domestic sheep and bighorns have co-existed in many of the same areas for decades without, apparently, decimating bighorn herds.
- While *M. ovipneumoniae* (Movi) is often identified as the pathogen that causes respiratory disease in bighorns, there is no single pathogen responsible for causing the most common respiratory diseases in bighorn sheep clearly tied to domestic sheep contact on the open range. In fact, there are documented die-offs of bighorns in areas far removed from any domestic sheep, not to mention healthy bighorn populations that carry Movi.
- *M. ovipneumoniae* has been confirmed present in moose, caribou, mule and white-tailed deer, bison and other species. In many cases Movi has shown to be endemic if several species.
- USDA is heavily involved in research to identify the causes of bighorn diseases and transmission vectors and the sheep industry strongly supports this research. Yet, research conducted by USDA’s intramural science agency, the Agricultural Research Service, has specifically being *ignored* by USFS. In abject contravention to previous congressional direction.

ASI recognizes the legal obligations of the Forest Service and BLM to analyze all threats to the viability of bighorn sheep. However, ASI does not recognize “single species viability” as trumping all legal obligations for multiple use of federal lands, including grazing. Calls for closing various allotments and removing domestic sheep despite clear scientific cause and effect, have already occurred. Given this, ASI requests a simple, equitable exchange: provide suitable alternative allotments for those sheep operators whose permits in bighorn habitat have been reduced as a result of arbitrarily applied “science”.

This exchange represents more than just good intentions—making alternative allotments available will require completion of an environmental analysis and other clearances, and this can take some time. Therefore, translocations of domestic sheep to alternative allotments should not be mandated until NEPA is complete and all challenges to the use of those allotments by domestic sheep are resolved. ASI strongly supports this equitable approach allowing for the survival of the domestic sheep industry in the face of mounting challenges related to bighorn habitat.

For more information, please visit the ASI website at www.sheepusa.org.
Please contact Jim Richards at jrichards@cgagroup.com or (202) 448-9500 for more information.



FY2026 Interior, Environment and Related Agencies Appropriations Request

Proposed FY2026 Report Language:

Bighorn Sheep Conservation.—The Committee directs the BLM and the Forest Service to complete Risk of Contact analyses using the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies' occupied bighorn habitat maps, telemetry data, and recent bighorn observations. The Service is further directed to transparently and promptly share findings with other federal land management agencies, state and local governments, state wildlife agencies, and state and federal animal health professionals, including the Agricultural Research Service, permittees, and stakeholders. The Committee directs the Forest Service to engage the Agricultural Research Service and the aforementioned cooperating agencies and participants to ensure the best professional scientific understanding of where and if disease transmission occurs, and the degree of that risk, before making further management decisions that impact permittees. In direct acknowledgment of the fact that the presence of the pathogen most commonly blamed for causing respiratory disease in bighorn sheep, *M. ovipneumoniae*, has been confirmed as endemic in other wildlife species, the Committee directs the Service to sample other wildlife in occupied bighorn habitat for the presence of *M. ovipneumoniae*. The Forest Service is further directed, if warranted, to use this base of information to identify and implement actions to resolve high-risk of disease transmission allotments, including if agreeable to the permittee, the relocation of domestic sheep to lower-risk allotments, with minimal disruption and displacement of permittees. However, translocation of a permittee cannot be ordered until a proper analysis, in direct coordination with the Agricultural Research Service, of the risk of pathogen conveyance from species other than domestic sheep has been conducted. The Forest Service is directed to provide quarterly briefings to the House and Senate Committees on Appropriations, both in writing and in person, on its progress and adherence to the directives contained herein.

Proposed FY2026 Bill Language:

SEC. XXX. The Secretary of the Interior, with respect to public lands administered by the Bureau of Land Management, and the Secretary of Agriculture, with respect to National Forest System lands, shall make vacant grazing allotments available to a holder of a grazing permit or lease issued by either Secretary if the lands covered by the permit or lease are unusable because of drought, wildfire, or conflict with wildlife, as determined by the Secretary concerned. *Provided*, That the terms and conditions contained in a permit or lease made available pursuant to this section shall be the same as the terms and conditions of the most recent permit or lease that was applicable to the vacant grazing allotment made available. *Provided further*, That Section 102 of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (42 U.S.C. 4332) shall not apply with respect to any Federal agency action under this section.