



March 7, 2025

The Honorable Brooke Rollins
Secretary of Agriculture
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Pennsylvania Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

The American Sheep Industry Association (ASI) is honored to congratulate your confirmation as Secretary of Agriculture. We regret that our first communications with you are to bring attention to what are potentially unintended consequences to critical Agricultural Research Service (ARS), USDA programs that provide broadly impactful on-the-ground problem-solving agricultural research.

The American Sheep Industry has and will continue to invest energy into ensuring the U.S. Sheep Experiment Station continues to perform work supporting U.S. agricultural economics. The work performed at USSES serves our nation by supporting food and fiber, wildlife, shared land use challenges and the cross-cutting area of animal health. USSES is a one-of-a-kind location in that its problem-solving work is often moved directly from the laboratory to the taxpayer.

To conduct its problem-solving mission, the USSES brings a unique and collaborative approach that has gathered a diverse group of stakeholders. USSES collaborates with other USDA ARS units, other federal agencies, and with universities throughout the country. The ability of the USSES to establish funded Research Support Agreements with partners, such as the University of Idaho, is an important component of USSES' ability to carry out its mission.

One simple example of how the USSES serves U.S. taxpayers is its role in educating veterinary students in large animal veterinary medicine. The USSES has recently established a collaboration with the Texas Tech School of Veterinary Medicine concerning a training internship. Rural America, where so much of our nations' food and fiber is grown, faces a critical challenge from a lack of large animal veterinarians, which not only places animal well-being at risk but also threatens the ability to provide our nation with a secure food supply. The USSES offers a one-of-a-kind environment that mimics actual ranching operations and is capable of providing a true understanding of the needs of rural livestock production.

The USSES also conducts rangeland fire and grazing research to provide critical insights about the effects of fire and grazing on forage quality, fuels management, soil health, biodiversity, wildlife habitat, and how grazing livestock can shape the structure and composition of rangeland plant communities. Certainly, this research is worth preserving as it serves livestock producers, land management agencies (like US Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management), wildland and prescribed fire managers and operators, wildlife conservation groups, and university partners. Results guide federal and state land-management agencies towards the best management of public lands regarding livestock grazing, mitigation of catastrophic wildfire risk, mitigation of invasive species risk, recreational use, wildlife management, fire management planning, and environmental regulatory planning.

Rangelands are important ecosystems that support food and fiber production on ranches and public lands across the US West. Rangeland science supports the wise use of these resources.

However, the uptake of science by managers and agencies is still limited, and this creates barriers to adaptation and profitability for ranchers. To improve the uptake of new science, the USDA, USSES is developing a method called the "Living Laboratory" model. This involves ARS scientists teaming up with ranchers, land managers, and conservation organizations to co-design and test new ideas at the US Sheep Experiment Station. By involving stakeholders directly in grazing, prescribed fire, and habitat management research, the Living Laboratory reduces conflict over rangeland issues, generates novel solutions to real-world problems, and helps ensure the continuity of ranching livelihoods.

Because of its location, the USSES has a unique environment that can help address many key issues, such as habitat conflicts between wildlife and livestock, resource conflicts between wildlife and human recreation, sport, industry, and wildfire. Some examples of these types of conflict include species of concern like the sage grouse and bighorn sheep, and protected species such as grizzly bears.

The rangeland conflict between Bighorn sheep and domestic sheep due to the pathogen, *Mycoplasma ovipneumoniae*, is another good example. The USSES is part of the *Mycoplasma ovipneumoniae* Project that is designed to identify appropriate and economic ways to prevent disease in livestock and wildlife and importantly to provide for shared land use promoting economic growth. The USSES plays a vital role in helping to find solutions to these types of conflicts and concerns. Along these lines, the USSES has grown in its contributions to animal health and is clearly prepared to continue to grow and expand its influence in this important problem-solving area.

Mycoplasma ovipneumoniae pathogens are at the heart of the conflict between bighorn sheep and domestic sheep on the rangeland. Its presence impacts the sustainability of both the domestic sheep industry and bighorn sheep. To date, the main method for protecting the health of bighorns from potential pathogen contamination is to separate the animals from domestic sheep, which has resulted in the considerable loss of access to grazing allotments used by the sheep industry. The recent USSES project, known as the Intelligent Virtual Fence Initiative, is designed to aid in the separation of wild and domestic sheep on open range and could serve to allow the continued use of sheep grazing allotments. These two project examples are supported by ASI and their continuation will require all current staff positions to be retained.

We understand the need to reduce the size of government but believe there are some roles the government has that provide a greater benefit to the general society. This is the reason for the word "service" in the agency's name - Agricultural Research Service. The ARS serves as a partner to ranchers and farmers but the entire public benefits from the research the agency carries out. The work done by the USSES clearly fits in with this greater good; it is truly a "gem" laboratory. It would be a shame to lose it, or any of the facilities operated by ARS. We respectfully urge you to maintain and grow the mission of USSES and to continue the good service provided by ARS.

Thank you for considering our request for your support of the USSES. If you have any questions, please let me know.



Ben Lehfeldt
ASI Board President