



KUFM RADIO COMMENTARY

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US Experimental Sheep Station EIS

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There is, alas, no shortage of examples of dysfunctional government these days. Nevertheless, it is particularly discouraging to see the US Forest Service pulling in one direction while another agency within the same federal Department of Agriculture--the U.S. Sheep Experimental Station based in Dubois Idaho-- insists on pulling in the opposite direction.

As part of a package of Forest Plan Amendments associated with delisting grizzly bears in the Yellowstone area, the five National Forests surrounding Yellowstone Park agreed that retirement of sheep grazing allotments was the preferred approach to reduce conflicts between domestic sheep and the growing populations of grizzly bears and wolves on these National Forest lands. With help from the National Wildlife Federation and other conservation groups, all of the sheep grazing allotments in the Primary Conservation Area for grizzly bears surrounding Yellowstone National Park have now been retired and these former conflict areas converted into secure habitat for wildlife. This work was accomplished without dissention because the retirements were done via voluntary agreements with the ranchers who had permits to graze their livestock on these Forest Service lands.

Meanwhile, despite extensive expressions of concern from conservation groups, from private citizens, and from other federal agencies, including the US Fish and Wildlife Service and the Bureau of Land Management, the Department of Agriculture's Sheep Experimental Station is proposing to continue its practice of grazing sheep in the Centennial Mountains, right along the continental divide between the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest in Montana, and the Targhee-Caribou Forest in Idaho, right in the area where retirement of sheep grazing is a priority for the Forest Service.

Particularly galling in this regard, is that the Sheep Station has made no attempt to justify its continued use of these high elevation pastures as necessary to sheep station functions. I attended a tour sponsored by the Sheep Station several weeks ago during which Station staff explained a number of useful research projects they were conducting on the low elevation pastures they own. However, they made no mention of why they needed to continue to use these high elevation pastures other than to assert, in response to my questions that continued use of these pastures was important to accomplish Sheep Station objectives. The same assertions were made in the draft Environmental Impact Statement now pending that would continue to allow them to do what they've always done with respect to grazing sheep on the high elevation pastures. These pastures, unlike in the past, are now being increasingly frequented by grizzly bear and wolf populations that are expanding westward from Yellowstone National Park and must pass through these sheep station pastures if they are ever going to be able to

establish connectivity with the large wilderness areas in Central Idaho. Assertions like those made by the Sheep station represent are neither science or good public policy unless backed up by documentation of the necessity to use them.

If continued use of these high elevation pastures was critical to accomplish Sheep Station objectives, evidence for this should have been presented in the Environmental Impact Statement. That's precisely what an EIS is for. Instead, the Sheep Station just blew off the concerns raised by conservation groups and other federal agencies. Neither did the Sheep Station's Environmental Impact Statement provide any support for their work that was based on trends in the sheep husbandry industry where, in fact, grazing on high elevation pastures is in decline as is sheep grazing throughout the West. Many ranchers that once grazed sheep are either now grazing cattle or have moved their sheep to lower elevation agricultural areas where the grazing season is longer and the conflicts with predators do not occur or are very rare

One of the objectives of the Sheep Station is ecological research. However, in the list of work completed or being done at the Sheep Station, there was no indication that any meaningful work had been done or was being done on these high elevation pastures that are critical habitat to wildlife. As near as can be told from the Sheep Station Environmental Impact Statement, they could stop using these pastures and turn them over to the Forest Service without compromising ongoing Sheep Station functions in any way. Essentially, the Sheep Station just proposes to continue doing what it has always done regardless of the cost to wildlife and changes in the importance of the area to wildlife. In these days, when the federal government is looking for ways to cut money and unnecessary programs, this stubbornness undercuts public support for the Sheep Station. Continuing to do this unnecessary work also it makes opponents out of groups that otherwise could be supporters of sheep station research.

I urge listeners to get contact the Sheep Station during the comment period on their draft Environmental Impact Statement which ends on Oct. 3. Alternative 3 is an alternative that would eliminate sheep grazing in the Centennial Mountains but would continue to allow grazing and research on sheep husbandry at the lower elevation pastures near Dubois. In addition, Alternative 5 would eliminate sheep grazing in some lower elevation pastures where sheep station grazing is occurring near some re-introduced populations of big horn sheep. You can access this editorial on the KUFM website to get instructions on how to access the draft EIS and the address to send your comments. Or you can get the information by Googling "US Sheep Experimental Station" and once there searching on the term "EIS".

It is time to get these 2 federal agencies in the Department of Agriculture pulling in the same direction.

This is Sterling Miller for the National Wildlife Federation. Thanks for listening.

Send comments to: USSES@ars.usda.gov, with the subject line "USSES 2010 DEIS Public Comments" by Oct. 3.

Website with the draft EIS is: <http://www.ars.usda.gov/News/docs.htm?docid=17878> The EIS is at the bottom of a list of previous steps in the process and was posted 8-9-11. The date on it is July 2011.

