DECISION NOTICE
Reintroduction of bighorn sheep into the Greenhorn Mountains, Montana
September 26, 2001

Proposal

The Proposed Action is for Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) to reintroduce Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep (*Ovis canadensis canadensis*) in the Greenhorn Mountains of southwest Montana. FWP identified three potential winter range release sites. Of the three identified sites, the Greenhorn Creek release site (at the confluence of its forks) was selected. This selection was based on habitat suitability, distances from domestic sheep operations and other potentially conflicting land uses, land ownership, overlap with existing wildlife habitats, juxtaposition to summer range, and estimated carrying capacity.

Bighorn sheep were native to the Greenhorn Mountains and probably were extirpated sometime in the early part of this century. Suitable year-round habitat for bighorns remains in the Greenhorns and has been identified during field observations. Currently, the nearest population of bighorns is in the Madison Range about 30 miles to the east of the proposed reintroduction site. Between the two mountain ranges lies the Madison Valley with the Madison River and populated agricultural lands. Bighorns are poor pioneers of new areas (Geist 1971) and are unlikely to reoccupy the area by natural means.

The Greenhorn Mountains occupy approximately 69,000 acres in an area between the Ruby Reservoir and the Gravelly Mountains. About 46,000 acres is managed by the U. S. Forest Service (USFS) encompassing most of the mountain range. The Greenhorn Mountains are found on the Madison District of the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest (B/DNF). Approximately 23,000 acres is managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). The remaining lands are a combination of private and Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) properties. None of the above agencies have any direct management authority over private lands.

The proposed action is to release sheep during winter at the confluence of the forks of Greenhorn Creek. The anticipated wintering area in the Greenhorn Mountains is primarily public land administered by the BLM and the B/DNF. The precise location of the release site would depend on the condition of the Greenhorn Creek road at the time of the release (winter) but would be on either private, DNRC or BLM land. BLM, private and DNRC lands are all directly adjacent in the release area, and all have approved their properties as potential release sites.

The purpose of this project is to reintroduce bighorn sheep to the Greenhorn Mountains. The project is needed to help restore the area's natural biodiversity, and would be a public benefit by providing potentially huntable wildlife and watchable wildlife.

Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) Process

FWP prepared an environmental assessment pursuant to MEPA. FWP made this document available during a public comment period that began on February 16, and ended on April 13,

and for restrictions on livestock permittees in the Gravelly Range. One of these commenters also indicated that the Gravelly Range has been domestic sheep range since before the Forest Service was established and that their private ranges were only 12 miles away.

Response: FWP's position is that there is sufficient distance from the expected range of the bighorns (approximately 10 miles) to the nearest public land domestic sheep allotment. This should sufficiently limit the potential for disease transmission to bighorns and breeding of domestic sheep by bighorns. This is true particularly considering the provisions outlined in the EA to further reduce those potentials.

There have been some other bighorn sheep transplants and augmentations in the state in the past few years. In the Highland mountains, bighorns were released this past winter within five miles of some domestic sheep. In the Elkhorn Mountains south of Helena, bighorn sheep were released 3-6 miles from the closest domestic sheep allotment a few years ago. There have been no reported conflicts between the two species or concerns expressed by sheep producers there. FWP supplemented a self-established bighorn herd in the Skalkaho Creek area east of Hamilton last year. The nearest domestic sheep are about 7-10 air miles to the west and southwest. There have been no reported conflicts there either.

The distance of the proposed release site and expected range is no closer to private domestic sheep ranges than the allotments on public land. Because the habitat on that private range is not suitable to bighorn sheep, they are not expected to make any use of those areas. To use that private range, bighorns would have to occupy habitat that is absent of any escape cover or escape habitat. Therefore, FWP does not consider that there is potential for this private range to be used.

As the analysis in the EA points out, there is no documentation available of disease transmission from bighorn sheep to domestic sheep. All the evidence of disease transmission is for transmission from domestic sheep to bighorn sheep. FWP's transplant guidelines stipulate that we will not ask for any land management changes because of bighorn sheep reintroductions. Also, the Forest Service commented that they do not plan to propose any changes in livestock allotment management in the Gravellies because of bighorn sheep being reintroduced to the Greenhorns. Finally, FWP is aware that the Gravelly Range has been domestic sheep range since before the Forest Service was established. We are also aware that the Gravelly Range was historic bighorn sheep range before domestic sheep were introduced. It is precisely because domestic sheep use that range now that we are not proposing to reintroduce bighorns to the Gravelly Range. That is also the reason we proposed the mitigation measures presented in the EA to limit the potential for contact between the two species. In addition, FWP will radio-collar 20-50% of the bighorns in order to monitor their movements through aerial flights. Adding this mitigative measure should help determine if the species are in proximity to each other so that FWP could initiate actions to reduce the potential for contact.

Comment: The EA was inadequate in its analysis of environmental and cumulative impacts, and that it did not meet its obligations under the Montana Administrative Procedures Act and

bighorn has been displaced from much of its former range. They also indicated the Greenhorns was one of only a few feasible reintroduction opportunities in the state and that reintroduction of bighorns there would provide much needed viewing and hunting opportunities.

No other issues were raised or comments offered that require a formal response. Copies of all written and e-mail comments are available in the project file for this proposal.

Decision

Based on an evaluation of impacts to the physical and human environment, under MEPA, the proposed action is not a significant action affecting the human environment. Therefore, an environmental assessment is the appropriate level of review, and an environmental impact statement is not necessary.

Utilizing the environmental assessment and public comment, a decision must be rendered by FWP, which addresses the potential impacts, concerns and issues identified for the proposed bighorn sheep reintroduction. In light of public comments and internal agency review, I accept the draft environmental assessment as final. I select alternative B to reintroduce bighorn sheep into the Greenhorn Mountains, south of Alder, Montana. In my decision, I carefully considered the likelihood of contact with domestic sheep and the wild sheep proposed for reintroduction. Based on my assessment, I think there is a relatively low likelihood of contact. For perspective, that risk appears to be much less than past successful reintroductions of sheet in other locations around the state. In addition, the radio collar monitoring that we will conduct will help us prevent potential contact between domestic and wild sheep should the wild sheep wander further than we expect.

In my final analysis, it is my clear conclusion that the value of reintroducing bighorn sheet in the Greenhorn Mountains far outweighs the limited risks and potential negative impacts associated with the reintroduction.

In consideration of these facts, I recommend that the Fish, Wildlife and Parks Commission approve the proposed bighorn sheep reintroduction.

Patrick J. Flowers
Regional Supervisor
Bozeman, MT
September 26, 2001

are met. If so, license levels will be based on the number of ¾-curl rams observed during surveys.

Ewes: Not applicable at this time.

Rams: Harvest would initially be conservative with the number of either-sex licenses recommended equal to approximately 10% of the rams observed during aerial surveys.

DEEP CREEK, CASTLE REEF, GIBSON LAKE NORTH, FORD CREEK (SOUTHERN ROCKY MOUNTAIN FRONT ELK CREEK – TETON RIVER COMPLEX)

(Hunting Districts 421, 422, 423, 424)

Description: The Southern Rocky Mountain Front region, sheep Hunting Districts 421, 422, 423, and 424, represents 1,105mi² with 434mi² (42%) privately owned and the rest managed by several public land management agencies. In Montana, the Rocky Mountain Front extends from Glacier National Park approximatly 155 miles in a southeasterly direction. Roughly 330mi² (30%) of these hunting districts are currently occupied by bighorn sheep during at least some portion of the year. Less than 10% of existing occupied sheep habitat is private land. Just over 450 square miles of this productive mosaic of mountain foothills and grasslands, forests and alpine vistas are managed by the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) – Lewis and Clark National Forest (NF). There are an additional 22mi² of foothills, predominated by grassland/shrubland vegetation, managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). The private land portion of the area is mostly cattle and hay operations with a smaller amount of dryland grain on the eastern perimeter. The Teton and Sun Rivers along with Deep, Willow, Smith, Ford, and Elk Creeks drain eastward through the area from the mountain front and the Continental Divide.

Public Access: Hunting as well as many other forms of outdoor recreation occurs on private and public lands throughout the Southern Rocky Mountain Front Complex. Bighorn sheep hunting access is mostly by foot or horseback on USFS trails. There is further access on BLM and private lands. Very little of the Lewis and Clark NF and adjacent BLM lands are authorized for motorized use. Access to private lands for bighorn hunting varies from limited to no access, with varying amounts of public use depending upon individual landowners. Currently, there are no Block Management areas in the area where bighorns reside. The majority of the bighorns in these hunting districts are available to the public during the hunting season. Most of the bighorn sheep on the Southern Front are migratory in nature, using mountain foothills for winter range habitat and backcountry subalpine and alpine territories for summer range. Popular areas for viewing bighorn sheep are along the Gibson Reservoir, Sun Canyon, Ear Mountain, Ford Creek along the Benchmark Road, and Willow Creek heading up to locales around Fairview Plateau.

Bighorn Sheep Populations: From a historical standpoint, the Southern Rocky Mountain Front sheep have for the most part been a healthy and numerous herd. The most recent large-scale disease die-off (due to a pneumonia/lungworm complex) occurred in 1983 to 1984. Other sheep die-off events were recorded between the 1920s and 1930s. Although some small herd segments stay within and between these hunting districts, bighorns frequently move to and from neighboring use areas. Bighorns occupy a variety of habitats within this region, including mountain foothills and meadows, steep, rocky ridges, avalanche chutes, and cliff faces. Historical survey and inventory records for these sheep date back to the middle part of the 20th century. Sheep habitats in these hunting districts are typically rugged and, in some areas, difficult to access for survey and inventory purposes. Traditional foot/horseback and some aerial surveys are conducted biannually (fall [rut] and spring) to monitor bighorn populations. Supplemental observations are recorded during other species survey efforts or summer survey efforts (mostly related to lamb recruitment). Animals are counted and classified by gender and number of lambs. Horn curl is used to classify ram age structure: ¾-curl +, ¾-curl, 2/3-curl, ½-curl and ¼-curl.

Bighorn census figures from late fall/early winter surveys from as early as 1955 for each hunting district are enumerated below (Figures 1-4 and Tables 1, 3, 5, and 7). All four hunting districts are annually surveyed during late fall/early winter (December) and spring (April). Yearly late fall/early winter rut survey counts