United States
Department of
Agriculture
Forest Service
March 2017

Snow Mesa and Wishbone Sheep Allotments
Proposed Action for Comment
Divide Ranger District, Rio Grande National Forest
Mineral County, Colorado

Domestic sheep at the base of Baldy Cinco on the Snow Mesa Allotment
Introduction

The Forest Service is a multiple-use agency, and ideally, the preference is to allow continued grazing by domestic sheep on National Forest System lands while also helping to manage for healthy populations of bighorn sheep.

To this end, national direction provided by Deputy Chief Holtrop in 2011 (USDA Forest Service 2011a) identified:

The relationship between bighorn sheep population viability and domestic sheep grazing on National Forest System lands continues to be an important wildlife and range management issue (...). Where management objectives include maintenance or enhancement of bighorn sheep populations, the potential for disease transmission from domestic sheep/goats to bighorn sheep must be addressed.

Where viability assessments indicate a high likelihood of disease transmission and a resulting risk to bighorn sheep population viability across the forest, the goal of spatial and/or temporal separation between domestic sheep/goats is the most prudent action we can use to manage risk of disease transmission.

Further direction provided by Deputy Chief Weldon in 2014 (USDA Forest Service 2014a) further directed line officers:

Best management practices to maintain separation [between domestic sheep/goats and bighorn] need to be applied to the extent they are effective in supporting both uses. When a line officer determines that the potential risk for contact is at an unacceptable level, those officers need to identify and analyze potential replacement allotments when developing management alternatives. The analysis for alternatives for replacement allotments should be part of a single decision-making process as part of ongoing efforts to develop site-specific solutions.

Project history

The Snow Mesa sheep allotments include four individual allotments – Snow Mesa, Miners, Table, and Ouray (vacant) – and are about 5 miles northwest of Creede, Colorado, in Mineral and Hinsdale Counties. Livestock grazing has occurred in this area since the early 1920s. The current permittees, permitted on the Snow Mesa, Miners and Table sheep allotments since 1998, are authorized to graze up to a combined 1,000 ewes (each with one or more lambs) from July 11 to September 15 for a total of 667 animal unit months (AUMs).

This project was initiated in 2012 because the Snow Mesa sheep allotments did not have a current environmental analysis. The previous range management plan/environmental analysis was completed in 1977, and conditions had changed since then. While resource conditions on the allotments were generally within desired condition, concerns for...
contact between domestic and bighorn sheep had increased. The drive to address the potential for contact came from four primary sources:

- Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep being added to the US Forest Service Rocky Mountain Region Sensitive Species list in 2007
- 2011 USFS Washington Office direction required the potential for disease transmission from domestic sheep/goats to bighorn sheep to be addressed
- Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) publishing the management plan for the affected bighorn herd in 2013 and identifying the Central San Juan Herd as Tier 2
- Monitoring by both the Forest Service and CPW that indicated spatial and temporal overlap between domestic and bighorn sheep in the areas on or adjacent to the northern boundaries of the allotment.

These indicated that there was a need to assess the risk of contact on the Snow Mesa sheep allotments and ensure that risk was at an acceptable level.

In 2012, public scoping on the Snow Mesa sheep allotments analysis was combined with that for the Fisher, Ivy, and Goose sheep allotments. At that time, the Fisher, Ivy, and Goose allotments were considered higher priority and the analysis for those moved ahead while the Snow Mesa analysis was deferred. Public scoping on the stand-alone Snow Mesa sheep allotments environmental analysis began in January of 2014.

Draft Environmental Assessment for comment, released August 11, 2015

Three alternatives were initially considered for the Snow Mesa analysis. These were disclosed to the public on August 11, 2015, in a draft Environmental Assessment (EA) for comment. At that time, the Proposed Action was Alternative 1 due to a high and unmitigatable risk of contact between domestic and bighorn sheep. The three alternatives analyzed in the draft EA were:

1) **Alternative 1 – No authorized grazing (2015 Proposed Action).** Grazing by domestic sheep would not be reauthorized and the allotments would become vacant.

2) **Alternative 2 – Continued grazing.** Grazing by domestic sheep would be reauthorized on the Snow Mesa Sheep Allotments with no change in allotment boundaries or grazing patterns.

3) **Alternative 3 – Allotment boundary reconfiguration.** Grazing by domestic sheep would be reauthorized; however, Snow Mesa Sheep Allotment boundaries would be reconfigured. The intent of boundary reconfiguration was to create a buffer and exclude those areas of highest contact concern between bighorn and domestic sheep. Portions of the vacant Ouray Allotment would be added to the Snow Mesa Sheep Allotments and made available for domestic sheep grazing.

Response to comments received

Comments received on the draft EA indicated that simply vacating the Snow Mesa sheep allotments was not an adequate proposed action. As a result of reviewing comments on
the draft EA, the Divide District embraced the challenge presented by the 2014 Weldon direction to identify and analyze replacement allotments as part of a single decision when the risk for contact was unacceptable. The Divide District worked with the interdisciplinary team, the Snow Mesa sheep allotments permittees, cattle permittees, and Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) to develop a new proposed action.

2017 Proposed Action: Wishbone Allotment

The proposed action is to create a new domestic sheep allotment, Wishbone, from seven pastures, authorize domestic sheep grazing on this allotment for the same duration and numbers as currently permitted, and vacate the Snow Mesa Sheep Allotments. The seven pastures in the Wishbone Allotment include Colorado Parks and Wildlife jurisdiction lands, portions of one active and one forage reserve Rio Grande National Forest cattle allotments, a portion of the vacant Ouray Allotment, and other Rio Grande National Forest System lands.

Project design features described in Table 2 and monitoring measures described in Tables 3 and 4 are incorporated into the proposed action.

The proposed action reduces the risk of contact between domestic sheep and bighorn sheep and subsequent potential disease transmission by providing for improved spatial separation between the two species. This alternative would result in no overlap between bighorn core herd home range and the domestic sheep allotment. In addition, topographical barriers such as the Rio Grande River, Highway 149, and several subdivisions, as well as project design features described in Table 2 improve the ability to manage for separation between the species. Increased accessibility of each of the pastures within the Wishbone Allotment would also improve the ease of monitoring and management of the domestic sheep.

This proposed action precisely follows the Holtrop direction to provide for spatial separation and the Weldon direction to identify and analyze replacement allotments as part of a single decision. (USDA Forest Service 2011a and 2014a).

A vacant allotment designation does not preclude grazing by livestock at some point in the future. The allotments may be restocked with domestic sheep at a later date—in this instance, if current conditions change (i.e., a proven vaccine is developed). A new analysis and NEPA decision would be required prior to restocking the allotments.

Location of the Proposed Action

The Wishbone Allotment is made up of seven pastures located within 10 miles of Creede, Colorado, and covers approximately 10,480 acres all within Mineral County.

Figure 1 illustrates the Wishbone Allotment relative to the Snow Mesa Sheep Allotments and the Rio Grande National Forest.
Figure 1. Snow Mesa Sheep Allotments and Wishbone Allotment relative to the Rio Grande National Forest.
The Wishbone Allotment includes the seven following pastures:
Crystal Pasture is a small portion of the Ouray Allotment that includes the basin below Crystal Lake and the upper headwaters of Shallow Creek.
Shallow Pasture consists of the northern end of the Shallow Cattle Forage Reserve Allotment that was reanalyzed for grazing in 2013. It is an allotment on which there is no current term permit obligation, and a determination was made to use the available forage on the allotment to enhance management flexibility for authorized livestock use. Parts of this pasture have been used to overnight domestic sheep trailing to and from the Snow Mesa area.
Sixmile Flats Pasture sits in the middle of the Wishbone Allotment and is located approximately six miles south of Creede, adjacent to Highway 149. It has not been part of a grazing allotment in recent history, but is intersected by the Middle Creek Livestock Driveway and has been grazed by trailing domestic livestock for many years.
The South River Pasture is made up of non-forested portions of the Rio Grande and Red Mountain pastures of the South River Cattle Allotment. The South River Allotment was analyzed for grazing in 2008 and is currently permitted for cattle grazing. To accommodate the capacity needed on South River Allotment for domestic sheep, some of the cattle currently permitted on the South River Allotment will be authorized to graze on the remaining portion of the Shallow Forage Reserve Allotment that is not being used under the Proposed Action for domestic sheep.
Deep Creek Road Pasture is a small, 40-acre parcel of the Rio Grande National Forest adjacent to Deep Creek Road that sits between Sixmile Flats Pasture and East Bench Pasture. The purpose of this small pasture would be to rest or overnight domestic sheep as they trail between other pastures. This small parcel is isolated from other public lands and currently receives little use.
East Bench Pasture consists of a long narrow bench located between Deep Creek and McKinney Gulch. The east end of this pasture was analyzed for grazing in 2009 as part of the Roaring Fork Allotment, but it has not been utilized due to location relative to other Roaring Fork pastures and lack of water. The west end of East Bench has been used in the past as a resting or overnight area for domestic sheep being trailed to and from the high country.
Coller Pasture is located along the Rio Grande River about three miles above South Fork. It consists of a portion of the Coller State Wildlife Area and adjacent Rio Grande National Forest lands. The Coller State Wildlife Area is managed for day use recreation and winter deer and elk habitat. This pasture contains a railroad corridor, and portions of it are irrigated annually by Colorado Parks and Wildlife. Domestic sheep grazing on the Coller State Wildlife Area is considered a connected action, despite that being CPW jurisdiction.

Grazing System under the Proposed Action
Sheep would be hauled from the San Luis Valley to the first pasture of the grazing season, trailed between subsequent pastures, and trailed back to the San Luis Valley at the
end of the grazing season. Lower elevation pastures would be utilized during the beginning and end of the grazing season, while Shallow and Crystal Pastures would be utilized during the middle of the grazing season. Elevations vary from 8,200 feet to 12,500 feet on the Wishbone Allotment. This variation provides a long growing season, early range readiness, and increases opportunity for deferred rotation. Timing and duration would be adjusted to coincide with annual fluctuations in grazing season, available forage, and land and livestock management objectives. In larger pastures, camp/bedding location would be moved every 7–10 days, and in smaller pastures that are used for less than 10 days, one camp location would be utilized. These locations will vary from year to year to prevent long-term impacts to vegetation. Herders, pack stock, herding dogs, and livestock protection dogs would be utilized to manage the flock. Water improvement projects would need to be implemented in the Sixmile and East Bench pastures to provide livestock water and improve livestock distribution. These projects would consist of developing a spring and piping water to a series of livestock troughs in a suitable location within each pasture.

The Wishbone Allotment contains about 10,480 total acres; 7,100 acres (68 percent) are determined to be capable/suitable for grazing of domestic sheep. Using 2016 measured annual forage production data and information from the Soil Resource Inventory (SRI) layers, USDA Forest Service 1996b) a conservative estimate of 2,240 AUMs are available on the Wishbone Allotment.

Management Direction

Specific management direction for Rio Grande National Forest, including desired conditions and objectives, is provided in the Forest Plan and its accompanying record of decision. Within this plan, lands are delineated and managed for a particular emphasis or theme known as a management area prescription. Each management area prescription in the Forest Plan has a description of the theme and physical setting for the area, a description of the desired future conditions for the area, and a list of standards and guidelines that apply. Management area prescriptions for the Wishbone Allotment are shown in Table 1. Livestock grazing is appropriate and authorized within all management prescriptions.
Project Design Features

Table 2 lists the anticipated project design features. Compliance with these project design features is of extreme importance to minimize potential contact with bighorn sheep. Non-compliance with domestic sheep stray management and trailing project design features will be addressed through the appropriate permit actions.

Table 1. Management area prescriptions for the Wishbone sheep allotment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Management Area</th>
<th>Wishbone (acres)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.3 – Backcountry</td>
<td>4,325</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.21 – Scenic Rivers and Byways</td>
<td>906</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.11 – General Forest &amp; Intermingled</td>
<td>1,263</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rangelands</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.13 – Forest Products</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.41 – Deer &amp; Elk Winter Range</td>
<td>3,321</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Lands</td>
<td>549</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>10,480</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Project design features for the Proposed Action

- Random on-site compliance monitoring of these project design features will be conducted by the Forest Service.
- At least one herder is required to be with the sheep. The main flock will never be left unattended, except at night and short periods when the herder is within sight distance of the herd accomplishing other tasks in the immediate area. A herder must remain in the camp during the night.
- It is the permittees’ responsibility to describe the allotment boundaries to their herders.
- Permittees will notify the Forest Service of the exact date and approximate time when domestic sheep will be entering and trailing off the allotment.
- Extensive efforts will be made by the permittees to remove every authorized domestic sheep from the allotments following the grazing season. All sheep must be accounted for (dead or alive) as they enter and exit the allotments at the end of the season. Special attention should be given to accounting for domestic sheep at all times. If sheep are unaccounted for, diligent efforts will be made to locate them as quickly as possible.
- Permittees will be required to respond to reports of stray domestic sheep within 24 hours. The Wishbone domestic sheep are the only permitted domestic sheep trailing from Creede to South Fork; it is assumed that all reported strays belong to the permittees. Within 4 days of stray notification, a full report (verbal or written) will be provided to the Forest Service that includes the time, date, and action taken to resolve the matter.
**Project Design Features**

- When trailing domestic sheep on/off the McKenzie stock driveway or on main pasture moves, the permittees/herders will make a sweep over the route traveled to locate any strays that may have been left behind. This pass will be conducted between 1 and 3 days after the move occurred. Domestic sheep will be kept in a tight group during trailing on and off the allotment with a minimum of two herders. The main area of concern is from the Crystal Lake Basin to Shallow/Miners Creeks.

- Tight grouping while trailing through the Wagon Wheel Gap area from the Pool Table Road to Palisade Campground is recommended to prevent contact with bighorn sheep in S-36. It is preferred that domestic sheep do not overnight in the Wagon Wheel Gap area.

- A reconnaissance of the area between the Pool Table Road down to the Palisade Campground will occur immediately before domestic sheep are trailed through. Any bighorn in this area will be hazed away from the road and trailing domestic sheep.

- Any bighorn sheep having the potential to come in contact with domestic sheep will be hazed to prevent contact from occurring. Special emphasis will be taken while trailing in the Wagon Wheel Gap – Palisade Campground area.

- The permittees will contact the Forest Service as soon as possible if bighorn sheep come into contact with domestic sheep. The Forest Service will then inform Colorado Parks and Wildlife.

- Sick bighorn sheep or carcasses must be reported immediately to the district office.

- A protocol specific to these allotments will be developed between the Forest Service, Colorado Parks and Wildlife, and the permittees in the instance of pending or confirmed contact between bighorn and domestic sheep.

- Every effort will be made to prevent bighorn sheep access to the domestic sheep salting locations. Leaving available salt or excess salt residue in the soil or on rocks or tubs presents a salt source that may attract bighorn and may even train bighorn to follow domestic sheep bands in search of salt.

- It is preferred that only block salt be used. If salt blocks are used, they must be kept with the domestic sheep at all times. Salt blocks will not be left behind when the domestic sheep are moved. If loose salt is used, it will be kept in a container and kept with the domestics at all times.

- See Heritage Resources in this same table for additional salting information.

- Salt blocks and loose salt in containers will be placed on rocky knolls, well-drained sites, or in timber where excessive trampling will not destroy plant growth. Salt or supplement will not be placed closer than ¼ mile to designated trails, streams, springs, water developments, or other wetlands without prior approval of the Forest Service.

- It is of utmost importance that the permittees spend as much time as necessary teaching the herders the requirements attached to the grazing permit, AOI, and all of the applicable project design features included here. AOI and project design features will be provided in English and in Spanish concerning proper management practices, so that this information can be passed on to Spanish-speaking herders (if applicable). Ultimately, it is the permittees responsibility to ensure that compliance is being achieved.

- Permittees are responsible for monitoring the following: livestock numbers, pasture entry and exit dates, and allotment entry and exit dates. This information will be kept in written format and will be made available to the Forest Officer upon request. The Forest Officer may provide a reporting form for the permittee’s use and may specify a due date for its return to the Ranger District Office.

- Livestock will be herded and distributed across the allotment in order to achieve proper grazing utilization of key forage species.
### Project Design Features

- Livestock protection dogs and herding dogs are used at the discretion of the livestock owner under appropriate State and county laws and regulations.

- The Forest Service will post signs at trailheads (where practical) giving public notice of the presence of livestock protection dogs and working dogs in the analysis area.

- The Forest Service will reach out to residents adjacent to pastures to inform and educate about sheep and livestock protection dogs.

- Sheep bed grounds should be relocated every 5 to 10 days.

- Sheep bedding will not be allowed within 300 feet of any running stream, spring, lake, or designated trail. There may be some exceptions due to topography on the allotment, but these will be approved in advance by the Forest Officer.

- Sheep herder camps will be moved every 5 to 10 days and regularly rotated on an annual basis. By changing camps each year, bed grounds will be used only once every several years.

- Camps will be placed at least 200 feet from live water and designated trails.

- Camps will be kept clean and garbage packed out.

- All fires built for any purpose by the permittee and/or herder will not be left unattended and will be completely extinguished. Each camp must be equipped with a serviceable shovel and axe. Other restrictions may be required during periods when the Forest enacts “fire restrictions.” Those restrictions will be identified in the particular “fire restriction order.”

- **Death by Illness or Unknown Causes.** When permitted sheep die from disease, or any other cause, the carcass must be moved to a location greater than 200 feet from water, out of view of trails, away from any areas of substantial public use, and away from herder camps within 24 hours of discovery or notification by Forest Service personnel.

- Minimize livestock concentrations on sensitive soils, wetlands, and riparian areas through herding, and salt or supplement placement.

- Predator control (i.e., black bears, mountain lions, bobcats, and coyotes) will be conducted following the correct State, Wildlife Services, and Forest Service procedures.

- Any hay, straw, or other feeds used on the allotment will be either certified as being free of noxious plants (also called noxious weeds), or will consist of heat-treated pelletized feeds.

- Permittees will make every effort to ensure that livestock do not contribute to the transport of noxious plants onto the allotment(s).

- Some travel-ways are closed to vehicular use or have restricted seasons. Permittees are required to abide by all Forest road and trail restrictions and closures. Written approval from the district ranger is required prior to driving off road.

- Site 5ML748 will be avoided by all water development infrastructure of the Six Mile Spring by placing the pipe above the site on a steeper slope within the treeline. Sheep should be kept off of the site.
## Project Design Features

- Salt locations should be moved on a continual basis and located in areas of low site potential and far from significant heritage resources. Range managers will coordinate with archaeologists to select the most optimal locations for the protection of unidentified cultural resources. To mitigate the effects of erosion stemming from livestock grazing on unidentified and potentially significant cultural resources, Forest Service range personnel must report substantial erosion to the Heritage Program Manager.

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- If any new actions are planned, such as spring developments, water haul sites, or new fence, or if grazing patterns change or livestock numbers increase, additional cultural resource assessment is required to determine if additional survey is needed prior to implementation.

- All people associated with operations under this authorization must be informed that any objects or sites of cultural, paleontological, or scientific value such as historic or prehistoric resources, graves or grave markers, human remains, ruins, cabins, rock art, fossils, or artifacts shall not be damaged, destroyed, removed, moved, or disturbed. If any of the above resources are encountered in connection with operations under this authorization, the proponent shall immediately suspend all activities in the immediate vicinity of the discovery that might further disturb such materials and notify the Rio Grande National Forest authorized officer of the findings. The discovery must be protected until notified in writing to proceed by the authorized officer (36 CFR 800.110 & 112, 43 CFR 10.4).

### Monitoring

The techniques and protocols listed in the Rangeland Analysis and Management Training Guide (USDA Forest Service 1996c) would be used as the basis for monitoring vegetation. Techniques for evaluating streambank stability and alteration would follow the Watershed Conservation Practices Handbook (FSH 2509.25). Standard wildlife monitoring protocols would be used as the basis for monitoring wildlife populations, specifically bighorn sheep.

Implementation monitoring is short term and evaluates whether livestock management is being applied as prescribed. The Forest Service conducts this type of monitoring through administration of the grazing authorization (permit), which includes inspection of the analysis area.

Under the Proposed Action, the Forest Service will evaluate whether livestock management was in compliance with the grazing authorization, including the allotment management plan and AOI, which are part of the authorization. The permittee is also required to perform certain aspects of this monitoring as described in Table 3.

Monitoring emphasis will also be focused on bighorn sheep in coordination and conjunction with CPW. Conducting annual post-season/winter population surveys, preferably during the month of December, is a monitoring item identified in the Finalized Bighorn Sheep Management Plan for Data Analysis Unit RBS-22, Central San Juan Bighorn Sheep Herd.

Effectiveness monitoring is long term and focuses on determining whether the analysis area is meeting or moving toward desired conditions, and if the rate of change is
acceptable. This level of monitoring is intended to ensure that all resource areas are meeting or moving toward desired conditions (within the scope of this analysis).

Project-level monitoring would specifically focus on maintaining resource conditions. The effectiveness monitoring schedule that would be followed under the Proposed Action (Table 3) focuses on long-term trends for: (1) overall permittee compliance, (2) meeting or moving toward Forest Plan standards and guidelines relative to upland and riparian vegetation conditions, (3) maintaining separation between bighorn sheep and domestic sheep, and (4) overall compliance with the Forest Plan Chapter V monitoring elements to ensure that overall stocking levels are appropriate relative to other resource values.

Feedback from monitoring, and any resultant adjustments of management actions, would be dependent on the specific action alternative selected. Minor management adjustments could be made annually through the AOI. Changes that cannot be done through the AOI may require new NEPA analysis.
Table 3. Implementation monitoring item, method, and frequency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monitoring Item</th>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Compliance checks (meeting requirements AOI/allotment management plan/term grazing permit; see the requirements in section 2.5)</td>
<td>▪ Site visits</td>
<td>Annual and as need indicates&lt;sup&gt;1&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upland forage utilization (Forest Plan, Range, page III-14) and riparian residual stubble height (Forest Plan, Riparian Areas, page III-5; Range, page III-14)</td>
<td>▪ RAMTG&lt;sup&gt;2&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Variable&lt;sup&gt;3&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ WCPH&lt;sup&gt;2&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permittees are responsible for monitoring the following: livestock numbers; pasture entry and exit dates; allotment entry and exit dates</td>
<td>Written format made available to the Forest officer upon request</td>
<td>Weekly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permittees and Forest Service are responsible for monitoring for stray domestic sheep, keeping a log of locations/occurrences, reason for occurrence, and action taken to correct the situation</td>
<td>Written format made available to the Forest officer upon request</td>
<td>Daily</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Forest Service will pursue additional monitoring of permitted domestic sheep and goat grazing and/or trailing patterns via use of global positioning system collars, “SPOT satellite messenger,” or other technology that will provide detailed data on movements and grazing patterns of domestic sheep and goats.

The following eligible and unevaluated sites will be monitored the first year sheep are put on: 5ML289, 5ML725, 5ML726, 5ML727, 5ML729, 5ML748, and 5ML731.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monitoring items for Bighorn Sheep for a Tier 2 Population (CPW and USFS responsibility)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population statistics (age class and sex ratios)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Aerial flights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Coordinated ground counts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupied habitat and distribution will provide information on occupied habitat and bighorn distribution throughout the herd unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Aerial flights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Coordinated ground counts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring Item</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| General herd health: lamb production, lamb:ewe ratios, age of rams harvested,  | ■ Aerial flights late summer and winter  
■ Coordinated ground counts  
■ Colorado Parks and Wildlife harvest database | Minimum of every other year, or as funding permits                        |
| hunter success rate, and number of rams observed                                |                                                                        |                                     |
| Pack goat use and recreational impacts in key bighorn sheep habitat use         |                                                                        | Annually                            |

1 Permittees are responsible for compliance with all relevant terms and conditions associated with the grazing authorization. The Forest Service would make annual compliance checks and report the results to the responsible official for action, if necessary.


3 The Forest Service may vary the frequency of inspections on a case-by-case basis for this monitoring item depending on such factors as annual weather fluctuations, past permittee compliance history, and changes in current resource and/or social issues. Non-compliance would dictate annual monitoring until satisfactory compliance is attained. Relevant Forest Plan standards and guidelines are available online at: [http://www.fs.fed.us/r2/riogrande/projects/plan/documents/planchap3.pdf](http://www.fs.fed.us/r2/riogrande/projects/plan/documents/planchap3.pdf)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monitoring Item</th>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trend in overall compliance with AOI, allotment management plan, and term grazing permit (must be static or improving)</td>
<td>Site visits</td>
<td>Annually</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vegetation cover and frequency by plant species, ground cover, and production by life form on benchmark sites (must be static or improving)</td>
<td>RAMTG 1996</td>
<td>5–8 years¹</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riparian trend on benchmark sites</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forest Plan Chapter V monitoring compliance to ensure proper stocking relative to other resource values in the analysis area (must be static or improving)</td>
<td>RAMTG 1996</td>
<td>5–8 years¹</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Monitoring items for Bighorn Sheep for a Tier 2 Population (CPW and USFS responsibility)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monitoring Item</th>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population statistics (age class and sex ratios)</td>
<td>Aerial flights</td>
<td>Minimum of every other year in late summer and winter; ground counts early to mid-summer, or as funding allows</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coordinated ground counts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupied habitat and distribution will provide information on occupied habitat and bighorn distribution throughout the herd unit</td>
<td>Aerial flights</td>
<td>Minimum of every other year in late summer and winter; ground counts early to mid-summer, or as funding allows</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coordinated ground counts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General herd health: lamb production, lamb:ewe ratios, age of rams harvested, hunter success rate, and number of rams observed</td>
<td>Aerial flights late summer and winter</td>
<td>Minimum of every other year, or as funding allows</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coordinated ground counts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Colorado Parks and Wildlife harvest database</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹ The responsible official would decide if trends are acceptable, whether conditions are moving toward or meeting Forest Plan desired conditions, and whether changes are occurring at an appropriate rate of change. Forest-wide desired conditions are available online at: [http://www.fs.fed.us/r2/riogrande/projects/plan/documents/planchap1.pdf](http://www.fs.fed.us/r2/riogrande/projects/plan/documents/planchap1.pdf)

Public Review and Comment

The Rio Grande National Forest invited public comment and participation on this project as it has evolved. These methods included:

- Original Snow Mesa Sheep Allotment scoping letter combined with the Fisher/Ivy/Goose Allotment on March 19, 2012. Following scoping, it was decided to complete two separate analyses with Fisher/Ivy/Goose being the higher priority of the two. That analysis was completed on September 25, 2013.

- Listing in the Forest’s schedule of proposed actions in 2012 (jointly with the Fisher/Ivy/Goose Allotment).

- Public notice in the Valley Courier (published March 27, 2012), the newspaper of record (jointly with the Fisher/Ivy/Goose Allotment).

- A second scoping letter, specifically for the Snow Mesa Sheep Allotments, and scoping packet was mailed to the public on January 8, 2014, and was made available on the Rio Grande National Forest website.


- Public notice in the Valley Courier (published January 9, 2014), the newspaper of record.

- News article printed in the Valley Courier on January 9, 2014 requesting written comments.


- A total of 27 hardcopies, letters, or emails were sent out announcing the availability and website location of the draft EA to individuals and/or organizations who previously requested hard copies or further involvement.

- The legal notice initiating a 30-day comment period on the EA was published on August 11, 2015, in the Valley Courier, the newspaper of record.

- An article seeking public input was also published in the Valley Courier on August 12, 2015.

The majority of comments received in response to the 2012 and 2014 scoping efforts identified the risk of contact and the potential for subsequent disease transmission from domestic to bighorn sheep. Other concerns included potential grazing impacts on plant communities, impacts on several other species of wildlife, hunting and other recreational experiences including hiking the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail (CDNST), impacts to soils and water, and economics.

Seventeen comments were received in response to the draft EA during the 30-day comment period that started on August 11, 2015. All of these comments revolved around the controversy of the potential for disease transmission between domestic sheep and bighorn sheep and on the potential impacts to the permittees and the domestic sheep
industry. These comments are available on the Forest’s project website: 
http://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=42886.

How to comment on this proposed action

The comment period is 30 days from the first day after publication in the Valley Courier, the Rio Grande National Forest’s newspaper of record. The publication date of the legal notice in the newspaper of record is the exclusive means for calculating the time to submit written comments on a proposed project. Publication is expected around March 8, 2017.

Only those who submit timely and specific written comments, signed by each individual or entity or verify identity upon request, during the 30-day comment period will be eligible for Objection status under CFR 36 Part 218.24 (b)(4).

Written, facsimile, hand-delivered, or electronic comments concerning this project will be accepted. Written comments should be submitted to Snow Mesa and Wishbone Sheep Allotments at:

Divide Ranger District
13308 W. Hwy 160
Del Norte, CO 81132

Comments may also be sent via e-mail to comments-rocky-mountain-rio-grande-divide@fs.fed.us or via facsimile to 719-657-6035.

Additional information, including hard copies of the proposed action, may be obtained by calling Tanner Dutton or Dale Gomez at 719-657-3321 or visiting the project’s website: http://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=42886.