



UNITED STATES ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY

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Ref: 8ORA-N

David Whittekiend
Forest Supervisor
Uinta-Wasatch-Cache National Forest
857 West South Jordan Parkway
South Jordan, UT 84095

Susan Eickhoff
Forest Supervisor
Ashley National Forest
355 N. Vernal Ave.
Vernal, UT 84078

Re: Comments on the High Uintas Wilderness Domestic Sheep Analysis Project Supplemental Draft Environmental Impact Statement (SDEIS)

Dear Mr. Whittekiend and Ms. Eickhoff:

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has reviewed the above-referenced document pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and Section 309 of the Clean Air Act (CAA). The CAA Section 309 role is unique to EPA. It requires EPA to review and comment publicly on any proposed federal action subject to NEPA's environmental impact statement requirement.

The EPA has reviewed the SDEIS additional information, and our comments are focused on that information. In summary, the new information includes new data and results related to the risk of contact (ROC) model regarding potential disease transmission from domestic sheep to Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep. There are also updates to the terrestrial wildlife analysis to reflect current data, changes in species lists, and additional literature. Additional bighorn sheep conservation measures were added to the proposed action based on the August 2022 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) entitled *Bighorn Sheep and Domestic Sheep Management – Nine allotments in Gilbert Peak Area of the Uinta Mountain Range* (Utah Division of Wildlife Resources, 2022). Two alternatives were analyzed in detail: (1) the no action, i.e., no grazing (environmentally preferable alternative) and (2) continue current livestock grazing management (Forest Service proposed action).

The SDEIS includes information on five additional alternatives that were considered, but not analyzed in detail, and references a climate change analysis that was completed for the project in 2020. The revised ROC model indicates that two summer Forest Service allotments, Gilbert Peak and Painter Basin, overlap the core herd home range (CHHR), meaning that the Uintas bighorn sheep have a high ROC with those allotments. One of the additional alternatives that was not analyzed in detail would close the Gilbert Peak and Painter Basin allotments to reduce the possibility of multiple contacts with domestic

sheep, and the resultant potential for disease transmission. The EPA reached out to the Forest Service Natural Resources and Planning Staff Officer to inquire about the reasoning to support that decision. We understand the Forest Supervisors chose not to add that alternative to close grazing on Gilbert Peak and Painter Basin allotments because of concerns over rangeland conditions if grazing were to occur every year on the remaining allotment, to minimize recreational conflicts now and into the future, and to provide for long-term persistence and public support for bighorn sheep conservation. Important to this decision, there is minimal overlap in actual use areas of domestic and bighorn sheep and to manage what overlap does occur, the MOU puts in place preventative measures to help prevent comingling between the domestic and bighorn sheep during the key overlap times.

Finally, the analysis led to development of a project-specific Forest Plan amendment to ensure consistency with the 2003 Wasatch-Cache Land and Resources Management Plan. Neither alternative analyzed in detail was consistent with one of the forest-wide subgoals for biodiversity and viability in relation to bighorn sheep, specifically “Maintain viability of species at risk (including endangered, threatened and sensitive species and unique communities).” This is because the CHHR for the metapopulation of bighorn sheep extends across two forests, two states, and includes multiple jurisdictions including Forest Service, state, private, and Bureau of Land Management-managed lands. Based on that distribution, the viability of the bighorn sheep metapopulation cannot be maintained on the Wasatch-Cache planning area independent of the other lands associated with the population. A project-specific plan amendment was necessary to exempt the project from that specific Forest Plan direction. The EPA supports this Forest Plan amendment.

Based on the analysis in the SDEIS, the Uinta-Wasatch-Cache National Forest and Ashley National Forest are proposing to authorize grazing on five allotments on the UWC National Forest and five allotments on the Ashley National Forest. The allotments are located on the north and south slopes of the Uinta Mountains. The forests also propose to continue to use the sheep driveway that allows domestic sheep to access these 10 allotments as the sheep move from winter range onto the allotments.

The EPA did not identify significant environmental concerns to be addressed in the Final EIS. Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this SDEIS. If you would like to discuss our comments, please contact me at (303) 312-6155 or mccoy.melissa@epa.gov. You may also contact Jody Ostendorf, Lead Reviewer for this SDEIS, at (303) 312-7814 or ostendorf.jody@epa.gov.

Sincerely,

Melissa W. McCoy, Ph.D., J.D.
Chief, NEPA Branch
Office of the Regional Administrator