

Data Submitted (UTC 11): 10/23/2023 6:00:00 AM

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Comments: See Attachment

USDA Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Region,

Attn: USFS Chief Randy Moore, Reviewing Officer, C/O Director of Strategic Planning, 2nd floor,

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submitted electronically to http://www.fs.usda.gov/goto/gmug/forestplan_objections

October 22, 2023

Thank you for the opportunity to object to the Regional Forester's Species of Conservation Concern List for the GMUG National Forests and for your review and consideration of our comments. Great Old Broads for Wilderness - Northern San Juan chapter - with members in Delta, Montrose, Ouray and San Miguel Counties, takes particular interest in Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep as our members participate in citizen science monitoring of the Tier 1 S-21 bighorn sheep herd.

THE PLAN FAILS TO IDENTIFY BIGHORN SHEEP (OVIS CANADENSIS) AS A SPECIES OF CONSERVATION CONCERN.

Objector raised this issue in our comments (on the draft plan) dated November 23, 2021 beginning on page 9. Great Old Broads for Wilderness (Broads) also signed on to the conservation coalition draft comments dated November 24, 2021 beginning on page 159.

For reference throughout this objection:

FSH 1909.12 Land Management Planning Handbook Chapter 10 (page 38) under 12.52d - Species to Consider when Identifying Potential SCC states:

1. Species in the following categories should be considered:

1. Species with status ranks of G/T3 or S1 or S2 on the NatureServe ranking system. See exhibit 01 for description of NatureServe Conservation Status Ranks.

1.

1. Species listed as threatened or endangered by relevant States, federally recognized Tribes, or Alaska Native Corporations.
2. Species identified by Federal, State, federally recognized Tribes, or Alaska Native Corporations as a high priority for conservation.
3. Species identified as species of conservation concern in adjoining National Forest System plan areas (including plan areas across regional boundaries).
4. Species that have been petitioned for Federal listing and for which a positive [Idquo]90-day finding[rdquo] has been made.
5. Species for which the best available scientific information indicates there is local conservation concern about the species' capability to persist over the long- term in the plan area due to:
 1. Significant threats, caused by stressors on and off the plan area, to populations or the ecological conditions they depend upon (habitat). These threats include climate change.
 2. Declining trends in populations or habitat in the plan area.
 3. Restricted ranges (with corresponding narrow endemics, disjunct populations, or species at the edge of their range).
 4. Low population numbers or restricted ecological conditions (habitat) within the plan area.

A. GIVEN THE RATIONALE FOR SPECIES OF CONSERVATION CONCERN OUTLINED BY THE REGIONAL FORESTER, CRITERIA IN THE FOREST SERVICE HANDBOOK ARE MISAPPLIED AND THE DISCRETION OF THE REGIONAL FORESTER IS ARBITRARY. In reference to 3a above the Regional Forester (RF) states in the Species of Conservation Concern Final List & Process Rationale (Rationale,) "My process goes steps further in building the initial pool of species to consider by including for consideration species with a NatureServe Ranking of "S3" which is not among the NatureServe rankings listed at FSH 1909.12.12.52.d.3.a. Species with an "S3" ranking are considered in my process because the "3" indicates the species is "vulnerable" in the state and thus may not be secure in the plan area. Species that are secure in the plan area cannot be identified as SCC5." (Rationale, page 3)

Reference 5, at the end of this quote, refers to FSH 1909.12.12.52c.2. Upon reviewing this section of the FSH, there is absolutely no reference to a statement that disqualifies a species from the SCC list based upon its state NatureServ ranking, rather it states, "If the species is secure and its continued long-term persistence in the plan area is not at risk based on knowledge of its abundance, distribution, lack of threats to persistence, trends in habitat, or responses to management that species cannot be identified as a species of conservation concern. The RF makes the assumption that bighorn sheep across the GMUG are secure based upon the NatureServ ranking. However, the argument can be made that bighorn sheep are NOT secure based upon other considerations and criteria listed above in the FSH. The RF appears to have initially discounted bighorn sheep from the SCC solely based upon its NatureServe rating without consideration of 3. b, c, d & e above.

However, as the RF's Rationale continues, he allows for consideration of a species that "does not have a NatureServe Ranking of G/T 1 or 2 but all four of the indicators of conservation concern are demonstrated for that species." (Rationale, page 4.) So using his broad discretion, the RF ignores 3 b, c, d & e considerations in the FSH and concludes that all 4 of the indicators in 3. f. must be met for a species to be identified as SCC. Volume 2 (Appendix 3, page 193) of the FEIS states, "The Regional Forester has determined that a species must meet all four indicators for the conservation concern to rise to a level of "substantial." This so-called

"determination" is not founded on scientific data. CPW in their draft comments (November 24, 2021, page 7) challenges this determination as well. Broads' objection argues that this discretion is both misapplied and arbitrary and the RF should have considered categories 3. b, c, d & e AND whether bighorn sheep meet some (rather than all) the criteria in 3.f.

1. BIGHORN SHEEP QUALIFY FOR SPECIES OF CONSERVATION CONCERN BASED UPON CATEGORY 3.C. IN THE FOREST SERVICE HANDBOOK. Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) - the state agency charged with managing the state's wildlife - identifies Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep as a Tier 2 Species of Greatest Conservation Need in the State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP) (2015.) Bighorn sheep are the only ungulate species listed in the SWAP. In addition, bighorn sheep are included on the Sensitive Species List of the USFS Rocky Mountain Region/Region 2. (<https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/r2/landmanagement/?cid=stelprdb5390116>) Clearly, bighorn sheep should be considered for the GMUG SCC list per category 3.c. above, based upon the State of Colorado identifying them as a Species of Greatest Conservation Need and USFS Region 2 listing them as a Sensitive Species - both indicating a "high priority for conservation"

1. BIGHORN SHEEP QUALIFY FOR SPECIES OF CONSERVATION CONCERN BASED UPON CATEGORY 3.D. IN THE FOREST SERVICE HANDBOOK. Bighorn sheep are listed as a SCC in the Rio Grande National Forest Plan. (https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/fseprd534349.pdf) The Rio Grande NF adjoins the GMUG. Therefore, bighorn sheep meet criteria 3.d. for consideration for SCC. Listing them on the GMUG would certainly afford better management of the species since forest boundaries are not recognized by wildlife.

D. BIGHORN SHEEP QUALIFY FOR SPECIES OF CONSERVATION CONCERN BSAED UPON MEETING MORE THAN ONE INDICATOR IN 3.F IN THE FOREST SERVICE HANDBOOK. The objector agrees with the RF that bighorn sheep meet indicator 3.f. (1) regarding significant threats. Evidence demonstrates that bighorn sheep also meet the other three indicators, though an argument can be made that all four indicators need not be met for a species to rise to a level of substantial conservation concern. This objection defers to the wildlife experts in our state - CPW - to provide ample evidence that bighorn sheep within the GMUG satisfy the other three indicators 3.f.(2) (3) and (4) which the agency does in their comments on SCC list dated June 29, 2021. Grounded in scientific evidence, CPW demonstrates how bighorn satisfy the four indicators under 3(f) and subsequently urge the RF to list bighorn as a SCC. The RF seemingly discounted the state's wildlife experts in determining that bighorn sheep do not qualify as a SCC in the GMUG plan. Even still, Broads would argue that the RF misinterpreted the FSH by insisting that a species satisfy all four indicators.

REFERENCES

Colorado Parks and Wildlife. 2015. Colorado's State Wildlife Action Plan: A strategy for conserving wildlife in Colorado.

<https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/r2/landmanagement/?cid=stelprdb5390116>

https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/fseprd534349.pdf

CPW comments on SCC list, June 29, 2021

CONCLUSION

Given that bighorn sheep are identified as Species of Greatest Conservation Need and as Sensitive Species by CPW and USFS Region 2 respectively, these facts alone should elevate the species to a SCC. Combine these identifiers with the fact that the home ranges of several GMUG bighorn sheep herds overlap with the Rio Grande National Forest and there should be no question that bighorn sheep satisfy two important categories outlined in the FSH. Finally, consider CPW's sense of urgency and concern for the species as outlined in their comments on the SCC list, and Broads' contests that the RF misapplied the selection guidance and used his discretion in the application of FSH 12.12.52d in a manner that is not based upon the scientific record regarding bighorn sheep. Broads vehemently object to the RF's omission of bighorn sheep from the SCC and stand with CPW that bighorn sheep warrant SCC listing.

SUGGESTED REMEDY

The Reviewing Officer should:

1. reconsider the Regional Forester's interpretation and application of the guidance in the FSH for selection of SCC in relationship to Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep,
2. consider the unequivocal recommendation of Colorado Parks & Wildlife, and
3. ultimately list bighorn sheep as an SCC in the final GMUG Forest plan.

Thank you for your consideration of this objection from Great Old Broads for Wilderness. Sincerely,

Robyn Cascade

Northern San Juan Chapter Great Old Broads for Wilderness

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