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Comments: Hello,

I'd like to comment on the working draft plan for the GMUG as it references the use of pack goats in the GMUG National Forests.

I understand that there is a desire to have a low risk of potential disease transmission between domestic animals and Bighorn Sheep. I'm aware of the fragility of the bighorn sheep and the die-offs which have occurred. And, I'm very supportive of the preservation and survival of Bighorn Sheep.

I have hiked with pack goats since 2000. Both my wife and I have back issues and cannot carry backpacks anymore. Without the help of our goats, we could not do overnight trips into the backcountry/wilderness of our National Forests. For me, hiking in our National Forest back country / wilderness is important for both my physical and mental wellbeing/health.

Over our 19 years of goat packing, we, or our goats, have never been even close to Bighorn sheep in the wilderness; however, we have seen Bighorn sheep in small towns and along road sides in farm country where they are accustomed to being close to people and domestic livestock. However, it's different back in the wilderness, they never come near us. I can recall only one, very distance, fleeting, sighting of a Bighorn sheep while hiking with our goats.

While we live in Washington state, we have traveled to Colorado to hike in the National Forest with our pack goats multiple times in the past. This includes packing with our goats in parts of the GMUG.

For families with small children, seniors, or other people with limited abilities; pack goats can be a means to access the back country of our public lands which would otherwise be inaccessible. Some people use horses, mules, or llamas; but because of the animal's size and/or the handling skill required these other pack animals are not a viable alternative for some people with more limited abilities, whereas pack goats are.

The working draft plan for the GMUG says:

"FW-STND-SPEC-16: To maintain effective separation among species in habitat occupied by bighorn sheep, the use of recreational pack goats and the use of goats and sheep for invasives and/or noxious weed management is prohibited."

I understand that this amounts to a forest wide ban on the use of pack goats. First, pack goats should not be lumped together with "the use of goats and sheep for invasives and/or noxious weed management". The management practices and the number of animals involved are vastly different. With pack goats, there are only a few animals, for a relatively short period of time, and they are kept very close by, and under human control.

I understand that the working draft plan allows grazing of domestic sheep on large sections of the GMUG. It's my understanding that there is good scientific evidence of a fairly high risk of disease transmission between domestic sheep and Bighorn sheep. While there is the assumption / speculation that pack goats might transmit disease to Bighorn sheep; the science does not support that assumption. Thus, the forest wide ban on pack goats does not make sense.

Nothing has absolutely zero risk. My reading of the science says that the risk of disease transmission from pack goats to Bighorn sheep is minimal, like horses, mules, or llamas. All of which are allowed in the draft GMUG

Forest Plan.

I'd ask that the GMUG Forest Plan acknowledge pack goats as an important recreational use. And that the plan establishes guidelines / management practices which allow reasonable pack goat use, while recognizing the concern for Bighorn sheep. As with people, horses, mules, llamas and dogs; I think a reasonable balance exists.

Thank you for considering my comments.