

**Date:** November 19, 2021

Dear Interested Parties:

The Bridger-Teton National Forest (BTNF) has been working the past few years on projects associated with our range program, specifically the potential for restocking certain vacant allotments while conserving bighorn sheep populations. You have expressed interest in these projects, and I wanted to give an update on their status and next steps.

I will start with some background. In 2017, the Forest updated the “Bridger-Teton and Caribou-Targhee National Forests Bighorn Sheep/Domestic Sheep Risk Management Strategy”. This document has guided the Forest in recent years as we have navigated managing bighorn sheep and grazing opportunities for domestic sheep. The agency’s goal is to retain opportunities for domestic sheep grazing on the national forests while maintaining the viability of bighorn sheep populations. It is important to note that all high-risk allotments, which are considered high management priority, are currently not grazed by domestic sheep on the BTNF.

In addition, we collaborate on implementation of the State-wide Bighorn Sheep Interaction Working Group Report and Recommendations. This cooperation includes consideration of the status of various bighorn sheep herds on the Forest (core native herds vs. cooperative management vs. non emphasis areas). With this context, most herds on the BTNF are considered core native herds. The main exception is the Darby herd, which is considered a non-emphasis herd under the Wyoming plan. This was considered in the development of the 2017 Strategy and allotments that intersect the Darby herd are considered low management priority for bighorn sheep.

In the past few years, we had added capacity to move forward with analysis to potentially restock some of the 18 vacant allotments on the BTNF. The reason for moving ahead on these particular allotments was that the allotments were considered low risk to core native herds from a disease perspective, there is demand for use of these allotments by livestock producers and the Forest received additional resources specifically for this work. This work included:

- Elk Ridge allotment complex on Pinedale Ranger District - additional funding was received specifically to conduct the NEPA process and work under the Good Neighbor Authority with the State of Wyoming, Department of Agriculture. These allotments were closed to sheep grazing but we are considering potentially restocking portions of these vacated sheep allotments with cattle.
- Seven allotment complex on Grey’s River Ranger District - funding from the State of Wyoming Rangeland Health Assessment Program allowed for data collection for all 7 allotments in this complex. In addition, the District had capacity to prepare for the NEPA process for Cabin Creek and Black Canyon allotments.



- The Forest initiated a scoping comment period for a proposed Forest Plan Amendment concerning the management of bighorn sheep on April 21, 2021. The reason for the proposed amendment is because current Forest Plan direction for bighorn sheep management only addresses the Darby herd, which is located in a non-emphasis management area. This standard is vague and difficult to implement since there is no geographic delineation of where this standard applies. Additionally, the standard does not apply to core, native bighorn sheep herds, which are the State's highest priority areas for bighorn sheep management.

Feedback from the public and many organizations indicates an overwhelming lack of support for the proposal to amend the Forest Plan. Although the proposed amendment language for protecting core, native herds was well received, the change in protections for the Darby herd was a major concern. The Forest believes that an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) would need to be completed to support this plan amendment. The simple timeline of completing an EIS would put this into the same timeframe of when the BTNF would be entering Forest Plan revision. Thus, the Forest believes it would be best to look at this issue in a holistic manner that considers allotment status and grazing across the entire BTNF as part of the revision process.

For this reason and due to other priority range workloads, I am pausing work on both the Forest Plan amendment and further NEPA analysis for the 7 sheep allotments on Grey's River District until the Forest Plan is revised or other circumstances allow additional range NEPA planning capacity. These allotments will remain vacant. Work that has been completed for the amendment will be incorporated into Forest Plan revision. We will continue the NEPA process on the Elk Ridge complex vacant allotments.

In the meantime, the Forest will consider the development of a working group and/or use the long-standing state-wide bighorn sheep working group to take a comprehensive Forest-wide look at the issues of herd dynamics and risk of contact prior to Forest Plan revision.

Thank you for your interest in the Bridger-Teton National Forest. If you have specific questions, you can reach out to Forest Range Program Manager Chad Hayward ([steven.hayward@usda.gov](mailto:steven.hayward@usda.gov)) or Forest Wildlife Biologist Jim Wilder ([james.wilder@usda.gov](mailto:james.wilder@usda.gov)).

Sincerely,

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