

FOREST SERVICE: Agency halts plan to separate bighorn sheep from domestic herds in Idaho (Monday, March 5, 2012) Phil Taylor, E&E reporter

The Forest Service said it will cut short a plan to prevent domestic sheep from transmitting a deadly disease to their wild kin on Idaho's Payette National Forest.

The decision by Forest Supervisor Keith Lannom comes three months after Congress inserted a policy rider in an appropriations bill that barred the agency from further reducing the level of domestic sheep grazing on national forests, a move that angered wildlife advocates ([Greenwire](#), Jan. 20).

Lannom's announcement halts a 2010 [decision](#) to reduce domestic grazing on the forest by 70 percent in order to reduce the risk of contact between the two species and prevent the transmission of fatal respiratory disease from domestic sheep and goats to bighorn sheep.

The agency last year implemented the first phase of the decision by reducing the amount of suitable grazing lands from about 100,000 acres to roughly 55,000 acres. The agency will no longer implement the final two phases, which would have reduced suitable acreage by more than 16,000 additional acres.

"The Payette National Forest has done an admirable job in balancing various interests while addressing this complex natural resource issue since 2005," said Regional Forester Harv Forsgren. "By halting implementation of the 2010 decision at the 2011 level in accordance with the 2012 Appropriations Act, Forest Supervisor Lannom continues the tradition of taking a balanced approach."

Idaho Rep. Mike Simpson (R-Idaho) said he inserted the policy rider to prevent more sheep grazers from being driven off the national forests.

But Craig Gehrke, director of the Wilderness Society's Idaho office in Boise, said the rider followed more than five years of public involvement and undermined a consensus among wildlife biologists that domestic sheep and goats should be kept away from bighorn sheep and their habitat.

"Over the past decade bighorn sheep populations in the western U.S. have plummeted, in large part due to diseases contracted from domestic sheep grazing on public lands," Gehrke said in an email. Like early Native Americans who died from smallpox and measles transmitted by early Europeans, bighorns have no immunity to diseases carried by domestic sheep, he said.

The Forest Service today said its hands are tied.

"The forest is complying with the requirements of the act while at the same time providing a lowered risk of contact between the two species," Lannom said in a statement.

Simpson, who is the House's top appropriator for the Forest Service, in January told [Greenwire](#) he is unsure whether he will seek to extend the restrictions in the next budget bill.

He said he will wait to see whether scientists are successful in developing a vaccine that could inoculate bighorns from catching the pneumonia-like disease.

"We want to take a breather and see if the people working on the vaccine, if that's a viable alternative," he said. "Some scientists say they're getting close."

Gehrke said researchers warn an effective vaccine is as much as 15 years away.