

STATEMENT OF GRAY N. THORNTON,  
President and CEO, Wild Sheep Foundation  
Before the House Committee on Oversight, Subcommittee on Interior, Energy, and the  
Environment will  
July 24, 2018

The Wild Sheep Foundation enhances wild sheep populations, promotes scientific wildlife management, and educates the public and youth on sustainable use and the conservation benefits of hunting while promoting the interests of the hunter.

This mission brings us in direct working relationships with grazing permittees on Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management lands. America's Federal public lands are the mainstay of our conservation mission and are a defining aspect of American heritage. Federal public lands in the lower 48 United States provide irreplaceable habitat upon which more than 90% of wild sheep depend.

We support the multiple-use mandate of Federal public lands and welcome grazing permittees as our neighbors both on the public land estate and in the western communities we share as home.

There is, however, a serious problem. We work directly with sheep-grazing permittees to prevent the spread of fatal pneumonia that wild sheep contract from bacteria carried by domestic sheep. It is difficult work, but vital to sustaining the dual legacy of wildlife and grazing on Federal lands. This disease is the greatest obstacle to wild sheep restoration, as we have found from 40 years of restoring wild sheep by capture-and-move field-work to expand wild sheep herds. As these bacteria are now widespread in both wild and domestic sheep, the problem is one of managing the risk of disease. That risk is multiplied when wild and domestic sheep mix. Therefore, when contact is observed, the standard operating procedure of state wildlife agencies is to kill the wild sheep involved to prevent them carrying the bacteria back into their own herds.

Our strategy for resolving this problem is firstly to support strict adherence to multiple use principles. There is room for both wild and domestic sheep on the Federal lands, just not in the same places. We negotiate alternative grazing arrangements, retirements, and conversions of sheep operations to cattle with willing partners. Significant amounts of the \$115 million we have invested towards wild sheep conservation have gone into private payments to woolgrowers.

We also fund research on the disease and willing-party buy-outs and retirements of grazing allotments to separate wild and domestic sheep. WSF endowed the Rocky Crate/Wild Sheep Foundation Endowed Chair for Wild Sheep Disease Research at Washington State University.

We also contribute nearly 40% of ALL wild sheep license and tag revenue to state wildlife agencies for their wild sheep programs.

There are several policy approaches that we are pursuing that would help solve this problem.

For the last 3 years, the Appropriations committees have issued budget direction to the Forest Service and BLM that resulted from productive negotiations between WSF and the American Sheep Industry Association. This language directs the agencies to engage with us, the woolgrower community, and state and other federal agencies in finding solutions. This budget direction has not yet resulted in the necessary regular program of work inside the agencies but some steps toward that have been taken. We recommend the Oversight Committee's attention to the development of such a program.

Various ideas have been advanced for streamlining the permitting process so that alternative allotments may be found and quickly occupied. We support the intent of these ideas when they are part of a program for solving disease-risk situations. Once disease-risk areas have been identified along with lower-risk areas, we are fully in favor of the fastest, most certain and reliable way of moving permittees to alternative allotments.

WSF is a member of the National Horse & Burro Rangeland Management Coalition and recommends the committee's attention to the continuing struggle to reduce the number of wild horses and burros on Federal lands. We are proud to be working on this area of common cause with grazing permittees and other multiple-use partners.

Access to Federal lands is another area of policy where WSF strongly supports improvements. Adequate, well-managed access is necessary for users of Federal lands such as hunters and ranchers, as well as for land and wildlife managers, and also to enable wildlife enthusiasts and other visitors to use federal lands and stimulate growth in local economies while promoting sense of ownership and conservation ethic.

In closing, the Federal public lands are the scene for many American traditions. The motto of the Forest Service – "lands of many uses" – should apply broadly across all agencies. The Wild Sheep Foundation will engage with the committee to make this a reality in whatever way we can.