

CATTLE, BIGHORN SHEEP, AND
THE CHALLIS E.I.S.

By
Loren D. Anderson
Bureau of Land Management
Salmon, Idaho

One of the few remnant Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep populations in Idaho winters in the steep south-facing breaks of the East Fork of the Salmon River.

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) licenses cattle use on this area. The cattle typically graze up through the bighorn winter range from a narrow strip of ranch land along the East Fork to summer pastures on the Challis National Forest and the Sawtooth National Recreation Area.

On December 30, 1974, in a suit against the BLM by the Natural Resources Defense Council (N.R.D.C.), U. S. District Court determined that the BLM must prepare Environmental Impact Statements (E.I.S.'s) for livestock grazing on National Resource Lands (N.R.L.) in order to comply with the National Environmental Policy Act. In June 1975 the court approved an agreement between BLM and the N.R.D.C. which specified 212 grazing areas requiring E.I.S. preparation within 13 years.

The Challis Planning Unit of the Salmon BLM District was subsequently selected as the model for future grazing E.I.S.'s. An E.I.S. team consisting of specialists in wildlife, fisheries, range, wild horses, forestry, recreation, archeology, soils, hydrology, minerals, lands (realty), and socio-economics was selected from personnel throughout the Bureau. The team began familiarization with the Challis Planning Unit on August 11, 1975. To meet the E.I.S. deadline, collection of data had to be completed and the impact analysis begun by September 15. A preliminary draft was completed and sent to Washington for internal and quality assistance review on December 15. The final E.I.S. is to be completed by June 30, 1976.

The East Fork of the Salmon River bighorn sheep herd, which is one of the few populations left in east-central Idaho, winters in the Challis Planning Unit. This herd has apparently undergone two major fluctuations since 1920. Lows in 1920 (approximately 50 sheep) and 1940-1950 alternated with peak populations (140-150 animals) during the 1930's and for a brief period in the mid-1950's. Population estimates since 1960 have been below 50 individuals. A minimum of 46 bighorn sheep were present on the East Fork of the Salmon River during an aerial census the third week of January 1975.

A resource inventory and analysis was completed for the Challis Planning Unit the spring of 1973 in accordance with normal BLM planning procedures. A year later a set of management guidelines referred to as a

Management Framework Plan (M.F.P.), was developed from the inventory and analysis of the area. An impasse over management direction for the East Fork sheep range developed during finalization of the M.F.P. The wildlife specialist, on the basis of recommendations by his predecessor, pushed for removal of livestock and managing the area primarily for the bighorn. The range specialist for the area countered that no definitive data were available to indicate that cattle use was a significant factor influencing the bighorn population. The deadlock was resolved by the District Manager's decision that the East Fork bighorn sheep range would be managed with the well-being of bighorn sheep the primary objective.

A comprehensive habitat analysis was deemed necessary to define precisely what habitat protection and enhancement measures would be required to meet the assigned objective. Detailed quality data would also be absolutely necessary for legal proceedings if it were subsequently determined livestock had to be taken off.

It was also felt that an independent organization not associated with the BLM should conduct the research. This would help assure a purely objective study and one which would hopefully avoid charges of bias. Special funding for the study was obtained and a \$12,000, 1-year contract was signed with the Idaho Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit out of Moscow, Idaho. Dr. James Peek and Mr. Jerry Lauer conducted the study. Actual field work began in August 1974 and was essentially continuous through June 1975. An almost overwhelming amount of data was obtained and analysis continued through much of the remainder of 1975. A final report - 117 pages long - was submitted to the BLM on December 19, 1975 - 4 days after the preliminary E.I.S. draft had been sent to Washington.

The E.I.S. team was to have their data collected and begin impact analysis by September 15. A significant amount of the bighorn habitat study data were still being analyzed at that time. The E.I.S. deadline necessarily precluded the use of pertinent information from the study and forced premature speculations, evaluations, and recommendations to be made. It was not without some serious reservations that Peek, Lauer, and the pertinent BLM personnel made the early judgments. Only time will tell if the input to the E.I.S. with regard to the East Fork bighorns was adequate and valid. At this time it appears that most of the contributions were essentially correct.

It is not yet known whether the E.I.S. will look favorably on continued livestock use of any of the East Fork N.R.L. The bighorn sheep study has shown that conflict does exist between livestock and bighorns on portions of the critical bighorn winter range. As proposed in the livestock grazing plan (which the E.I.S. is evaluating), cattle use would be terminated on this critical area. The grazing plan also outlines efforts to be made which will enable the affected ranchers to continue operations. These efforts include alterations of allotment boundaries of these and other ranchers, cuts in authorized use, some range manipulation projects and, since the involved ranchers also have permits on the U. S. Forest Service, close coordination with that agency will also be required.

Why bother making any accommodations for the rancher - why not just remove

the livestock, period? The recommendation to "take the cows off" is frequently heard, not only with regard to the East Fork bighorn sheep range but other wildlife ranges throughout the BLM as well. The recommendation is much simpler to make than enact and the end product of such an effort may be totally contrary to original intentions. Regardless of what the E.I.S. may or may not say or what appears best for the bighorn, the problems may not be solved by attempting to remove livestock entirely.

Developers have shown considerable interest in the holdings of the involved ranchers. One has reportedly offered \$1,500.00 per acre. The ranchers have assured us that they will have to sell if we cancel their grazing privileges. Wholesale development of this private land immediately adjacent to the critical bighorn winter range would undoubtedly prove disastrous. It is highly unlikely the bighorn would survive the snow machines, hikers, poachers, vehicular traffic, domestic dogs, and associated human activities typical of recreational developments. A considerable amount of Chinook salmon spawning takes place on the affected ranches. Full-scale development would undoubtedly eliminate that resource. Sizeable numbers of deer use the ranches and adjacent N.R.L. Severe adverse impacts on deer is all but guaranteed with development.

The human aspects surrounding the removal of livestock are also valid and must be considered. Family traditions and lifestyles which have been intrinsically tied to a given piece of ground for perhaps several generations may be permanently altered. The economic impact on the families, and indirectly on the general community, can be serious.

Not valid considerations? The humanistic elements, in the long run, make or break most programs and this is particularly true when "big government" is involved. Any animal, and that certainly includes man, if stressed beyond its tolerance may resort to actions of desperation. At the extreme, this may involve the direct destruction of the wildlife species involved and safety of the agency personnel normally working in a given area. An antagonistic public attitude may also be created such that nothing can be accomplished except by force or purchase. When there are major potential socio-economic impacts imposed on family units or the community you are no longer dealing in abstractions but hard, and most times difficult, realities.

The legal arena provides many pit-falls when attempting to terminate livestock use of the N.R.L. If the rancher takes advantage of his legal options the effort to remove his livestock can be tied up in court for years. If everything proceeds with absolute perfection, 4 years is about the earliest a court decision can be expected.

The court route is very risky and odds are the case will be lost. The agency's case can be easily destroyed if hard data are lacking. If new information surfaces during the trial the cause may also be lost. The judicial interpretation of a law may be entirely different than that expected. The bias of the judge also frequently determines who wins or loses. The court's decision will dictate to a large degree what can or cannot be done and there may be no similarity between that decision and what the

agency considers optimal resource management. It must also be kept in mind that until a final verdict is rendered, management of the area is frozen at the level existing at the time legal proceedings were initiated.

Take the cows off? Yes, it is a viable option but one that must be exploited with the utmost caution.

The E.I.S. will hopefully resolve the livestock grazing problems without specifically dragging the bighorns into the fray. Soil and watershed protection may take priority and deflect another emotional wildlife/livestock confrontation.

It is possible that the E.I.S. will create more than a few problems for wildlife habitat management. A concern exists that the Challis E.I.S. may directly or indirectly establish precedences and/or public attitudes which hinder optimal habitat management for the bighorn sheep and other wildlife species in the area. The course of the E.I.S. has been charted, however, and the BLM and the bighorns will live with the results...hopefully.