



Jack's Creek - Shoothy Creek Bighorn Sheep Habitat Area - ACEC

I. NAME: Owyhee River/Battle Creek/Deep Creek Bighorn Sheep Habitat Area - an Area of Critical Environmental Concern

II. MANAGEMENT OBJECTIVES:

- A. Protect and enhance the habitat for approximately 300 California bighorn sheep in the Battle Creek/Deep Creek/East Fork Owyhee River area.
- B. Protect and enhance bighorn sheep habitat for the potential re-introduction of sheep on the South Fork Owyhee River. The population goal for the South Fork is 150-250 bighorns.
- C. Protect and maintain the scenic and natural values present in the area.
- D. Protect, maintain or improve the habitat to at least a good range condition class.

III. DESCRIPTION:

A. General Description

This 175,000 acre area has numerous rugged, deep canyons which have exceptional scenic quality. The canyon complex provides the habitat to support an existing California bighorn sheep herd. The portion of the area along the South Fork of the Owyhee River contains suitable habitat for bighorn expansion or bighorn reintroduction.

In 1963, 1965 and 1966 a total of 38 California bighorns were released along the East Fork of the Owyhee River between Battle Creek and Deep Creek. The Idaho Department of Fish and Game estimates about 300 bighorns are now present in this Owyhee River population. Approximately 170 of these are within the Bruneau Resource Area and 130 are within the Owyhee Resource Area.

The area along the South Fork Owyhee River has been identified by the BLM and Idaho Department of Fish and Game as potential habitat for bighorn sheep. The area is an approved release site.

B. Relevance

This area satisfies the relevance criteria because bighorn sheep are a wildlife resource and the habitat needed to support them is considered to be a natural system or process.

C. Importance

The combination of scenic canyons and wildlife species found in this area is very unusual in southwestern Idaho.

Fewer than 1,700 California bighorns exist in the United States. The entire world population of California bighorns is limited to about 3,500 animals. Maintenance of existing populations and the

reestablishment of other populations is needed to ensure the continued existence of these bighorns. Protection of bighorn sheep habitat has been identified as a major concern by the Idaho Dept. of Fish and Game, various state and national environmental organizations as well as numerous individuals during the development of the Owyhee and Bruneau MFP and the Bruneau-Kuna Grazing EIS.

D. Criticalness

California bighorn sheep have been designated as a "sensitive species". "Sensitive species" refers to wildlife species which have been officially designated by the BLM and Idaho Department of Fish and Game through a Memorandum of Understanding. They are species for which there is concern for their continued existence. Although these species are not in as much jeopardy as endangered or threatened species, further population declines or habitat determination may result in the more restrictive listing.

Bighorn sheep formerly ranged over Owyhee County. They were eliminated sometime between 1920-1930 after a period of decline. A combination of factors is considered responsible for their extinction. Evidence suggests that the scabies mite, introduced by domestic sheep, was the principal factor in eliminating some populations and severely reducing others. Over-hunting and competition for forage with domestic livestock are considered contributing factors in the loss of the remaining populations.

Maintenance of suitable bighorn habitat in this area is dependent upon maintaining an adequate high quality food supply and limiting the amount of disturbance from people, vehicles, livestock or other activities. Bighorns generally avoid using areas where concentrations of other ungulates (cattle, horses, sheep, deer, antelope, etc.) occur. Bighorns restrict their habitat use to areas of less disturbance. This habitat constriction can cause temporary forage overuse and intraspecific stress, or both. The result is a lower carrying capacity. If the carrying capacity is reduced too far, the insidious effects of inbreeding may result in total loss of the population.

Except for the area west of Battle Creek there appears to be good habitat separation between cattle and bighorns. Cattle use of bighorn forage habitat (the plateaus) is low due to lack of water. Cattle use along the canyon bottoms is limited by the lack of access points. However, cattle use along the East Fork Owyhee River in the vicinity of Battle Creek and on some stretches of Battle Creek is occasionally heavy. Protection of the bighorn habitat is dependent upon maintaining or improving the range condition as well as maintaining the separation of use between domestic livestock and bighorn sheep.

Bighorns also avoid contact with people. Visits to bighorn habitat on the Owyhee River and its tributaries are infrequent throughout most of the year. The greatest influx of people occurs during the hunting season. During the month of May, the river is

usually floatable and a smaller peak of human use occurs at this time. If the level of human use increases significantly above current levels, the bighorn sheep population may decline.

E. Protectability

This area is capable of being protected by the special management measures described later. Factors which could jeopardize the scenic quality, natural values or bighorn sheep habitat can be regulated by the management measures specified.

IV. SPECIAL MANAGEMENT REQUIREMENTS

The following special management measures will be undertaken to protect the existing and potential bighorn sheep habitat areas and the natural and scenic values within the area.

- A. Activities or developments which would impair the scenic quality of the area would not be allowed. The area will be managed as VRM Class II with the canyon system as the Key Observation Point.
- B. Motorized vehicle use would be allowed only on designated roads and trails.
- C. Livestock use levels will be adjusted, if necessary, to provide adequate forage for the bighorn population goals.
- D. Allotment Management Plans (AMPs) will be developed which will maintain or improve the vegetation to at least a good range condition class.
- E. The management priority for the canyons will be for bighorns and other wildlife. Where necessary to prevent livestock access to canyons, livestock management measures (ie. salting or fencing) will be implemented.
- F. A separation of use between cattle and bighorn will be maintained by not developing livestock water sources within one mile of bighorn habitat unless the potential adverse impacts to bighorn can be avoided or mitigated.
- G. The conversion of cattle use to domestic sheep use will not be allowed unless the use will not be within one mile of the habitat and reasonably be guaranteed to be maintained by physical barrier of, but not limited to, fences and canyons.
- H. Public lands within bighorn habitat will be retained unless a proposed exchange results in the acquisition of higher quality habitat.
- I. Support the public acquisition of private lands and the exchange for state lands within bighorn sheep habitat.
- J. The current low level of human disturbance in bighorn habitat will be

maintained by not constructing or upgrading any roads that would lead to or encourage human disturbance in bighorn habitat. Use of the river by boaters will be restricted to levels that do not adversely impact the bighorn sheep.

- K. No surface occupancy will be allowed for oil and gas and geothermal exploration or development within the habitat area.
- L. The area will be recommended for withdrawal from the 1872 mining laws.

V. PUBLIC COMMENT

The ACEC recommendation if the area is not designated as wilderness, for the Bruneau Resource Area portion was presented to the public during the Bruneau-Kuna MFP II Open House meetings that were held on December 14 and 15, 1981. There has been no public comment specifically related to the recommendation. Most comments received during the public review period indicate that wilderness designation is preferable to establishing the area as an ACEC. On the Owyhee portion of the area, the area was recommended for management as a Bighorn sheep herd management area and as a special recreation management area at the open house meetings. The land use plan decision is to recommend it as an ACEC if it is not designated wilderness to be consistent with the recommendation for the Bruneau Resource Area. The special management requirements for the ACEC do not change from the specific management recommendations made for the herd management area or special recreation management area. There were no comments opposing the specific management recommendations for the area during the open house.