

Deal helps protect bighorn sheep habitat

By Daniel Schmidt
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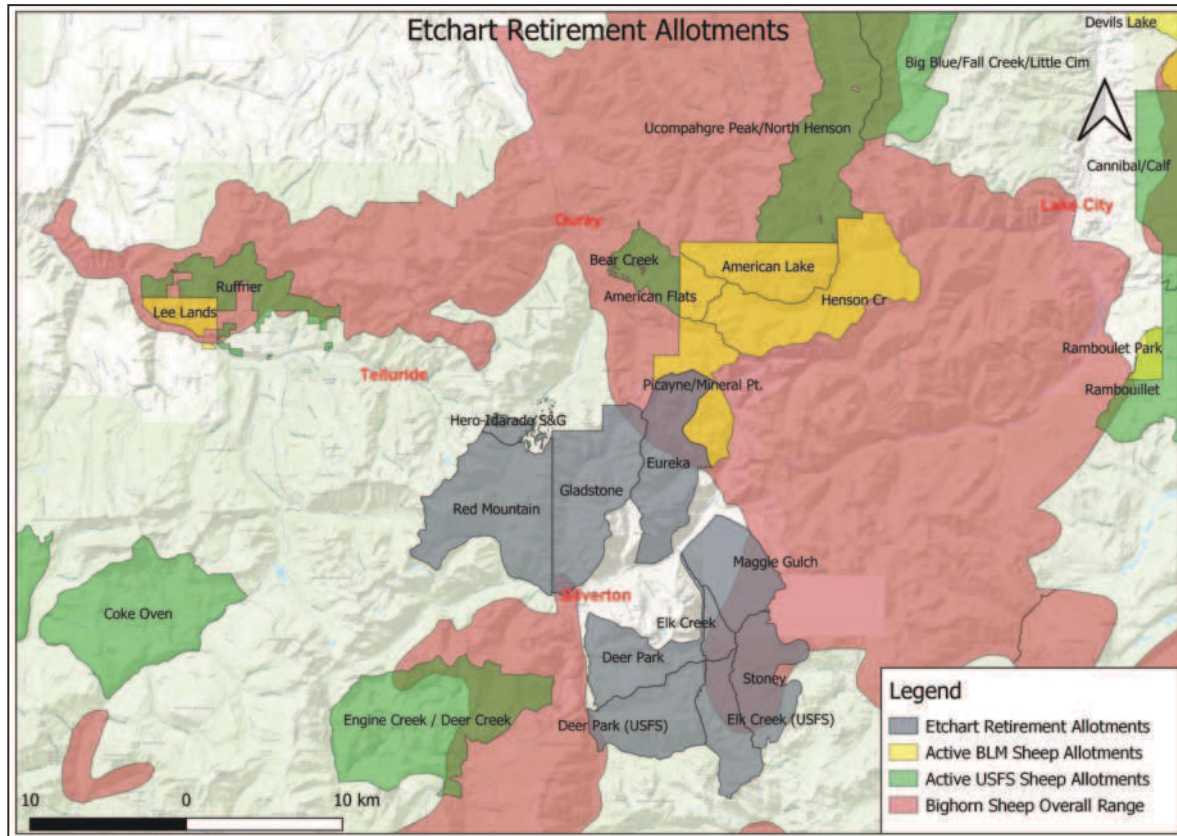
Montrose sheep ranch retires grazing permits south of Ouray

Efforts to protect bighorn sheep habitat in the San Juan Mountains recently received a boost after the National Wildlife Federation announced an agreement to retire nearly 102,000 acres of domestic sheep grazing permits south of Ouray.

In exchange, the Montrose-based Etchart Sheep Ranch, which has grazed those 10 allotments for more than 70 years, will receive fair-market compensation. The deal does not include the Etcharts' two allotments between Placerville and Telluride. The NWF declined to say how much the agreement is worth.

The deal is expected to decrease conflicts between the wild and tame sheep, and reduce the chances of transmission of diseases that can decimate wild bighorn sheep herds and wipe out an entire generation of lambs.

"The significance of this deal is that over a large area of occupied bighorn sheep range, we have eliminated the risk of pathogen transmission between domestic and bighorn sheep. It also provided an off ramp for the Etchart family, who were facing a number of conflicts on these allotments," said Bob McCready, NWF's wildlife conflict resolution program manager.



Graphic courtesy of Robyn Cascade, Great Old Broads for Wilderness

This map shows the retired allotments' proximity to historic bighorn sheep ranges in and around Ouray County.

According to McCready, conversations with the Etcharts to retire those allotments began around six years ago, with talks intensifying within the last 18 months.

The agreement represents one of the single largest retirements

in the 22 years the NWF has used compensated permit waivers to reduce conflict between bighorn sheep and domestic sheep. McCready said the deal could serve as a path forward for other ranchers facing similar pressures, though such deals

would require both sides to prove grazing on prospective allotments has a significant impact on wildlife.

While the vast majority of land included in the deal is located outside of Ouray County, local bighorn advocates say the move

will help sheep living within the county's borders.

"Bighorn sheep move, and it's not uncommon — especially a ram during the rut — (for them) to move 20 miles or more in a day. And so even though I think with one exception these allotments are outside Ouray County, the populations move. So the health of the herds in all of the San Juans will be benefited by lowering the risk of disease transmission between domestic and bighorn sheep," said Ridgway resident Robyn Cascade.

Cascade, a member of the national wildlife wilderness advocacy and stewardship nonprofit Great Old Broads for Wilderness, has helped monitor bighorn sheep populations in and around Ouray County for years. She added the deal would likely make monitoring efforts for area volunteers easier due to the decreased number of grazed allotments.

While the agreement between the NWF and the Etcharts removes potential threats from a broad swath of public lands, there are still concerns over other grazing allotments that may have conflicts between wildlife and livestock. Allotments that elicit the most concern from local advocates include 10 additional allotments permitted to

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SHEEP

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 9

other ranchers mostly southeast and east of Ouray.

While appreciative of the deal and its implications on bighorn sheep herd health in the San Juans, Rocky Mountain Bighorn Society Executive Director Terry Meyers said the remaining allotments still pose a threat.

“The way I would categorize (the deal) is it’s important for the local herd, but it unfortunately doesn’t take the steps necessary to completely protect that local herd, much less the other populations across the Western Slope,” Meyers said, referencing those other 10 allotments. “Now that this compensated permit waiver is complete, we need to continue to work toward resolutions on the remaining high risk domestic sheep allotments that overlap this herd.”

“It’s kind of a small piece, an important piece of a very, very big problem,” he added.

Retiring those remaining allotments, Meyers explained, would decrease the risk the herd would face repeated exposure to pathogens from domestic sheep. Reducing that risk would also give Colorado Parks and Wildlife additional incentive to manage the herd closer to its full population potential.

According to Meyers, 390 bighorn

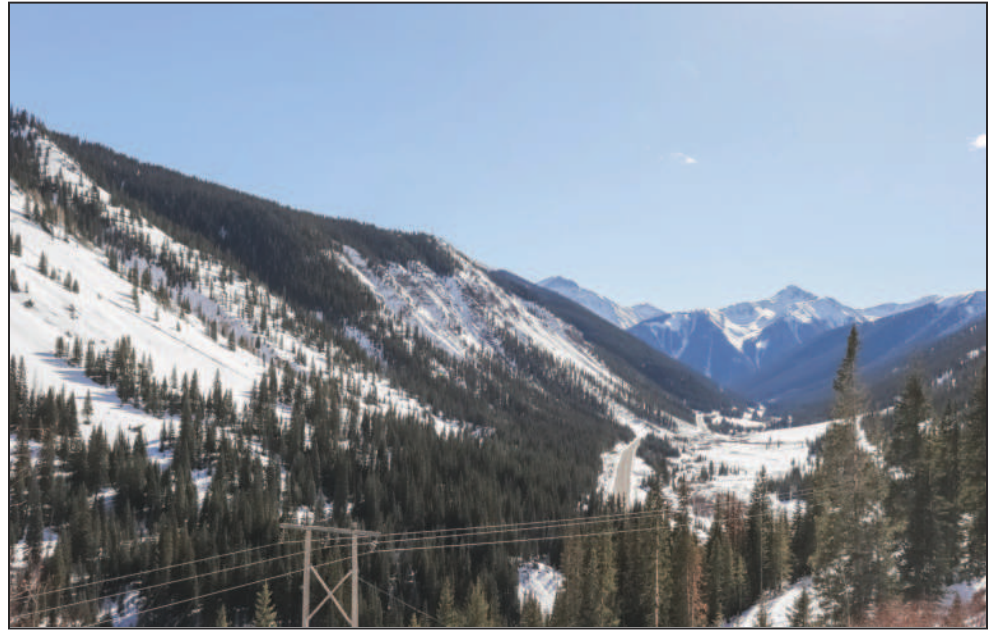
sheep currently make up the San Juans West herd. CPW estimates it could eventually support up to 1,000 animals, though he cautioned that figure was likely optimistic.

Meyers said the herd experienced a large-scale die-off in the late 1980s, which reduced it to roughly 45 animals. It recovered in the mid-2000s after decades of conservation efforts, reaching an estimated 400 bighorns by the early 2010s. However, years of low lamb survival rates, likely due to disease, dropped the herd to 340 animals by 2018.

When asked if the NWF planned to explore a similar agreement for those remaining allotments, McCready said the nonprofit didn’t have plans to do so, but that it would “love” to have conversations with those ranchers.

Despite the move being presented as a win-win for both conservationists and the Etcharts, McCready said the deal means the ranching family must give up grazing on historic lands at no fault of their own.

“I don’t want to present a win for the rancher as being something they would have chosen. They’re in a difficult situation. Their family has grazed livestock on these permits for many, many decades. It’s a big part of their business and their operation, so they really are giving up a lot,” he said. “I will add this conflict is not of their making. This conflict happened to them, not because of them.”



Above, a portion of the Red Mountain allotment can be seen from U.S. Highway 550 near mile marker 79 on Jan. 2. Right, a bighorn sheep in the San Juans.



Above photo by Daniel Schmidt
— Ouray County Plaindealer
Right photo courtesy Adobe Stock by RonM

The Etcharts did not respond to requests for comment by deadline.

CPW currently estimates there are

around 7,000 bighorn sheep in the entire state, a far cry from when 2,200 of North America’s largest wild sheep populated Colorado in the 1950s.

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SKIJORING

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dia claim they’ll be streaming the event, and are selling tickets. These are scams.

The event also includes a dinner (limited to the first 100 attendees) with awards and an auction at 6 p.m. Saturday at the

4-H Event Center, followed by a concert with Jake Jacobson at 9 p.m. The skijoring weekend ends with an awards presentation at 6 p.m. Sunday at the Ouray Elks Lodge, where fans are welcome to watch the awards and help celebrate.

For a full schedule of events visit sanjuanskijoring.com.

ALL-IN

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speaker. I was like, ‘What’s a crag?’ You know how there’s the bad crag dog? I was like that, but the human version,” Freedom said while laughing. “Looking back on it, I’m like, ‘Oh my God, I’m so embarrassed.’ I wish somebody would have told me before I came to that (event).”

While he found a sense of community and the potential for a more stable income through climbing, the experience was bittersweet.

“What else is there for me but this, you

know? Music isn’t paying the bills. It isn’t going to get me a potential place to die. Like most people worry about life; I worry about where am I going to die,” he said. “Most people have family or somebody. I’ve got me and whatever creators and whatever homies take care and hopefully not pity, because I won’t sign up for that pity stuff. That’s for somebody else.”

Editor’s note: The 29th annual Ouray Ice Festival and Competition is scheduled for Jan. 18-21 this year. The event includes clinics, presentations, talks and competitions. For a full schedule visit ourayicepark.com.

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