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Feds propose habitat for endangered bighorns

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FRESNO, Calif. -- More than 400,000 acres of wildlands in the eastern Sierra Nevada should serve as a protected habitat for an endangered mountain sheep rebounding from the threat of extinction, the federal government said this week.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's proposed critical habitat designation is a response to a 2005 lawsuit by environmentalists, who claimed the Sierra Nevada bighorn sheep couldn't recover because their habitat wasn't protected as required under the Endangered Species Act.

This proposal should end the argument, federal officials said.

"The whole purpose of the act isn't just to put species on the list," said Lisa Belenky, an attorney with the San Francisco-based Center for Biological Diversity, which filed the suit. "This is a good first step, because by preserving habitat, you're able to bring the species back from extinction."

The bighorns live much of the year atop the Sierra Nevada's granite peaks, where they forage for sagebrush and grasses, but predatory mountain lions and genetic problems caused by inbreeding have caused the population to crash.

Before the turn of the century, thousands of wild bighorns lived in the high Sierra. But only about 100 survived as recently as 1998, a year before the Fish and Wildlife Service listed the sheep as endangered.

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In their lawsuit, environmentalists singled out as a particular problem: the U.S. Forest Service's decision to allow ranchers to graze domesticated sheep on public lands thought to be crucial to the wild sheep's survival.

Domestic sheep not only compete for the sedges and grasses that grow in the rugged, mountain landscape, but can spread diseases like pneumonia and scabies when bighorn rams try to mate with their domesticated cousins, government scientists said.

Sheepherders dismissed assertions that their herd's proximity to the wild sheep played a role in their decline, and said the new designation could cause millions of dollars in losses to the \$1 billion wool textiles and lamb industry.

"The bighorn have been a very good surrogate tool to clear out areas of livestock grazing," said Tom McDonnell, a consultant for the American Sheep Industry Association, whose members graze their lambs and ewes in the Mono Lake area. "We will probably lose substantial amounts of grazing on private, state and federal ground."

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Federal officials control most of the land where the sheep, *Ovis canadensis californiana*, is found.

The proposed 417,577-acre critical habitat area runs from Tuolumne to Tulare counties and juts into the Inyo and Humboldt-Toiyabe national forests, along with neighboring land administered by the Bureau of Land Management.

Once the proposal becomes final next year, government agencies and private landowners inside its geographical boundaries will have to consult with the Fish and Wildlife Service to see whether a specific project -- like sheep grazing -- would jeopardize the bighorn's habitat or its recovery.

That's already the case for two other endangered species native to the Sierra Nevada that have critical habitat designations: the red-legged frog, commemorated in Mark Twain's short story "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County," and the Little Kern golden trout.

But managing the bighorn, which spend most of the year in the steepest part of the mountain range, can be tricky, said Bob Williams, field supervisor for the service's Nevada office, which oversees the Eastern Sierra.

"These sheep kind of pack together and stay together especially during the winter," Williams said. "If you took some parties' argument to the extreme, they would say we need Sierra Nevada bighorn sheep all the way to British Columbia, but we felt

like this area was enough for recovery."

The agency is also preparing a draft recovery plan they will use to coordinate wild bighorn recovery efforts with the Forest Service, National Park Service, U.S. Bureau of Land Management and the California Department of Fish and Game, Williams said.

The public can comment on the proposal for the next 60 days, and a final decision is due on July 17, 2008.

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