
BIGHORN SHEEP TRANSLOCATION: TWO CASE STUDIES FROM THE GROUND

Julie Cunningham,* Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Bozeman, Montana 59717

Howard Burt, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Bozeman, Montana 59717

Bighorn sheep (*Ovis Canadensis*) translocation is a major tool towards meeting bighorn population recovery goals statewide. However, finding and establishing release sites requires navigating a complex series of biological, political, and social evaluations. Here, we present two case studies of bighorn sheep relocation proposals in southwestern Montana followed from the idea phase through (near) resolution: the Bridger Mountains and the Madison Mountains. Both historic bighorn winter ranges, these two proposed locations differed in their biological, political, and social considerations. We discuss the model and timeline we used to meet biological criteria (defined by Montana's Bighorn Sheep Conservation Strategy), political checks proposed in Montana's Senate Bill 83 (mandatory criteria for bighorn sheep translocation), and the social needs of landowners, Montana's sportsmen and the Fish, Wildlife and Parks commission. This involved defining the proposed habitat (or affected area), contacting all landowners within or near the expected habitat, involving all stakeholders (county commissioners, sportsmen, Montana Woolgrowers, USDA Forest Service, and others), identifying domestic sheep herds nearby to quantify disease risk (and determining how to mitigate such risk if possible), assessing other major issues (highways, predators, subdivisions), developing the Environmental Assessment, employing landowner agreements, and finalizing the project. These case studies provide information to other biologists seeking to release bighorn in their areas. Recognition of non-biological needs and careful *a priori* evaluation can save time and effort and maximize the chance of biological success.