

PICKETT RIM BIGHORN SHEEP TRANSPLANT

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
OR-07-026-001

Bureau of Land Management
Burns District Office
28910 Hwy 20 West
Hines, Oregon 97738

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The Andrews Resource Area of the Burns District has prepared this Environmental Assessment to analyze possible effects of releasing California bighorn sheep, a Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Special Status Species (SSS), into identified historical habitat on Pickett Rim near Frenchglen, Oregon, about 60 miles south of Burns, Oregon.

A. Purpose of and Need for Action

The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) has proposed to release 30 California bighorn sheep into unoccupied historic habitat on Pickett Rim in support of "Oregon's Bighorn Sheep and Rocky Mountain Goat Management Plan" (2003) which lists this site as a high priority transplant area. Although there are other sites within Harney County identified for transplant of bighorn sheep, this is the only area at present, with no concerns of interactions between bighorn sheep and domestic sheep or access restrictions for monitoring of bighorn sheep movements. The proposed release site is T. 32 S., R. 32 E., Section 3 (see attached map). Alternative sites would be in T. 31 S., R. 32 E., Section 34, or T. 32 S., R. 32 E., Section 9. The release would occur in December 2006.

The need for this action is stated on Pages 35 and 36 of the Andrews Management Unit Record of Decision/Resource Management Plan (ROD/RMP) (2005). "The ODFW has been pursuing a Statewide effort to restore bighorn sheep into unoccupied suitable habitat and to increase populations in currently occupied areas (Oregon's Bighorn Sheep and Rocky Mountain Goat Management Plan, 2003). Both the BLM and ODFW have agency management plans and have coordinated to foster communication between agencies and the public. Although the ODFW has been successfully releasing and managing bighorn sheep on public land since mid-1960s, current populations and distributions are still considered below potential.

"Although the ODFW, retain(s) jurisdiction over Special Status species populations, the BLM, ODFW, cooperatively manage Special Status species populations and habitats through recovery plans, conservation agreements, and management objectives specified in their management plans. The BLM is involved in development of these plans and manages habitat in cooperation with the other agencies in support of these plans. The BLM and ODFW will work cooperatively to benefit management of Special Status animal species and their habitat as described in the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) of 2001 between the two agencies.

"Public land provides a high percentage of the total available and currently unoccupied land suitable for bighorn sheep. As principal land administrator of habitat capable of supporting bighorn sheep, the BLM involvement in this program is necessary. The BLM has a policy and responsibility to cooperate with State agencies to accommodate species management goals consistent with principles of multiple-use management.

"Bighorn sheep are native to eastern Oregon. Their presence contributes to overall biological diversity and productivity of public land. Public interest in observing bighorn sheep in their natural setting is widespread, and they are highly prized as a big game animal."

B. Conformance with Land Use Plans, Laws, Regulations, and Policy

This action is in conformance with the Andrews Management Unit ROD/RMP (2005) on Page 34, Objective 5, which states: "Maintain, restore or improve bighorn sheep habitat and allow for maintenance or further expansion of bighorn sheep populations as defined by the ODFW in *Oregon's Bighorn Sheep Management Plan*." On Page 38, the decision states: "The BLM will coordinate with the ODFW on population management of bighorn sheep. Transplants, reintroductions and natural expansion of bighorn sheep are allowed." The proposed action is in conformance with all Federal, local, Tribal laws, regulations and land use plans.

The decision is to allow for release of bighorn sheep into this area or disallow this action to take place.

CHAPTER II: ALTERNATIVES INCLUDING THE PROPOSED ACTION

A. Alternative A - No Action

Under the no action alternative no bighorn sheep would be released onto Pickett Rim and the identified historic habitat would remain unoccupied.

B. Proposed Action

The proposed action is for the ODFW to release approximately 30 California bighorn sheep onto Pickett Rim, just west of Frenchglen, Oregon, during December 2006. The bighorn sheep would be trapped out of the John Day River Basin and transported in horse trailers to the release site. Vehicles pulling the trailers would use existing two-track roads to access the release site.

CHAPTER III: DESCRIPTION OF THE AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

Pickett Rim is about 12 miles long and extends both north and south from the community of Frenchglen. The area is visible from Hwy 205 for most of its length and is popular for hunting big game and upland game birds. Water is scattered from the north near the Jackass Mountain telecommunication site to just south of the proposed release site. Within this area are several reservoirs associated with springs or natural runoff and two wildlife guzzlers.

The following critical elements of the human environment are either not known to be present or not known to be affected by the proposed action or the alternatives: SSS - Flora, Flood Plains, Air Quality, Prime or Unique Farmlands, Areas of Critical Environmental Concern, Wild and Scenic Rivers, Cultural Resources, American Indian Traditional Practices, Paleontological Resources, Hazardous Materials, Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs), Wilderness, Migratory Birds, Water Quality, Wetlands/Riparian Zones, Noxious Weeds, or Environmental Justice concerns. Although noxious weed seed could be transported by the animals from the capture site to the release site, at this time of year, there is almost no likelihood of picking up seed, so there would be undetectable impacts at the release site.

Critical Elements

A. Special Status Species – Fauna

Greater sage-grouse, a BLM Sensitive Species, is known to occupy suitable habitat along Pickett Rim. No other SSS are known to inhabit this area.

Noncritical Elements

The following noncritical elements occur within the area of potential effect and could be affected by the proposed action or no action alternatives:

A. Vegetation

Vegetation consists of mixed juniper, mountain big sagebrush and bunchgrass near the top of the rim to juniper, Wyoming/basin big sagebrush and bunchgrass near the lower slopes. Areas of low sagebrush, juniper, and bunchgrass are scattered on benches in the middle of the slopes.

B. Soils

The soils are generally moderately deep loams on the slopes and drainage bottoms where big sagebrush and juniper are present with shallower scabby soils in the low sagebrush areas. The slopes are steep and rocky near the top of the rim with mixed rolling and steep terrain down to the east near State Hwy 205.

C. Rangelands/Grazing Management

The project area is located in Lavoy Tables Allotment (#6031). The release site is in Hwy 205 Field which has no authorized use in it. Areas used by bighorn sheep would also include the rim parts of Savoy Lake and Lavoy Tables Pastures. Livestock use typically occurs in May through September in these pastures under a deferred rotation system. There are 1,653 AUMs permitted for livestock use in this allotment while 136 AUMs have been allocated for mule deer, 7 AUMs for pronghorn antelope and 36 AUMs for wild horses. Wild horse use areas do not overlap with proposed bighorn sheep use areas. No AUMs have been allocated for bighorn sheep which is consistent with other areas in the District since wild sheep and cattle have different use areas and no detectable dietary overlap. These pastures are all in mid to late seral condition.

CHAPTER IV: ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

Critical Elements

A. Special Status Species – Fauna

Alternative A – No Action: There would be no effect on any SSS as a result of enactment of this alternative.

Proposed Action: Bighorn sheep would be restored to unoccupied habitat on Pickett Rim. Populations would be allowed to expand into suitable habitat along the rim. No other SSS would be affected by this alternative.

Noncritical Elements

A. Vegetation

Alternative A - No Action: There would be no effect on existing vegetation as a result of enactment of this alternative.

Proposed Action: There would be some effect on existing vegetation as a result of vehicles and trailers turning around to leave the release site. During the first few months, vehicle tracks would be noticeable. After rain or snow has fallen, tracks would become unnoticeable. Vegetation that was run over would most likely respond favorably the following year.

B. Soils

Alternative A - No Action: There would be no effect on soils as a result of enactment of this alternative.

Proposed Action: There would be impacts to soils in the area of the release where vehicles would turn around to exit the site. Impacts would probably not be noticeable the following year. If soils are saturated at the time of the release, alternative sites would be used, and there would be no impacts to soils.

C. Rangelands/Grazing Management

Alternative A - No Action: There would be no effect on existing grazing management as a result of enactment of this alternative.

Proposed Action: There would be no effect on existing grazing management as a result of enactment of the proposed action since there is little dietary overlap between cattle and bighorn sheep.

Cumulative Effects

Alternative A - No Action: There would be no cumulative effects associated with this alternative.

Proposed Action: There would be no cumulative effects associated with this alternative.

As the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ), in guidance issued on June 24, 2005, points out, the "environmental analysis required under NEPA is forward-looking," and review of past actions is required only "to the extent that this review informs agency decision-making regarding the proposed action." Use of information on the effects on past action may be useful in two ways according to the CEQ guidance. One is for consideration of the proposed action's cumulative effects, and secondly as a basis for identifying the proposed action's direct and indirect effects.

The CEQ stated in this guidance that "generally, agencies can conduct an adequate cumulative effects analysis by focusing on the current aggregate effects of past actions without delving into the historical details of individual past actions." This is because a description of the current state of the environment inherently includes the effects of past actions. The CEQ guidance specifies that the "CEQ regulations do not require the consideration of the individual effects of all past actions to determine the present effects of past actions." Our information on the current environmental condition is more comprehensive and more accurate for establishing a useful starting point for a cumulative effects analysis, than attempting to establish such a starting point by adding up the described effects of individual past actions to some environmental baseline condition in the past that, unlike current conditions, can no longer be verified by direct examination.

The second area in which the CEQ guidance states that information on past actions may be useful in "illuminating or predicting the direct and indirect effects of a proposed action." The usefulness of such information is limited by the fact that it is anecdotal only, and extrapolation of data from such singular experiences is not generally accepted as a reliable predictor of effects.

However, "experience with and information about past direct and indirect effects of individual past actions" have been found useful in "illuminating or predicting the direct and indirect effects" of the proposed action. In this case, the basis for predicting effects of enacting the proposed action and alternative is based on published empirical research and the general accumulated experience of the resource professionals in the agencies with similar actions.

CHAPTER V: CONSULTATION AND COORDINATION

A. Participating Staff

Laura Dowlan, Wilderness and WSAs

Steve Dowlan, Natural Resource Specialist (Riparian, Flood Plains, Water Quality, Fisheries)

Gary Foulkes, District Planning and Environmental Coordinator

Terri Geisler, Hazardous Materials

Rick Hall, Natural Resource Specialist (Botany and Special Areas)

Matt Obradovich, Wildlife Biologist, Lead Preparer

Lesley Richman, Range Management Specialist (Weeds)

Jeff Rose, Air Quality

Cam Swisher, Environmental Protection Specialist (Range)

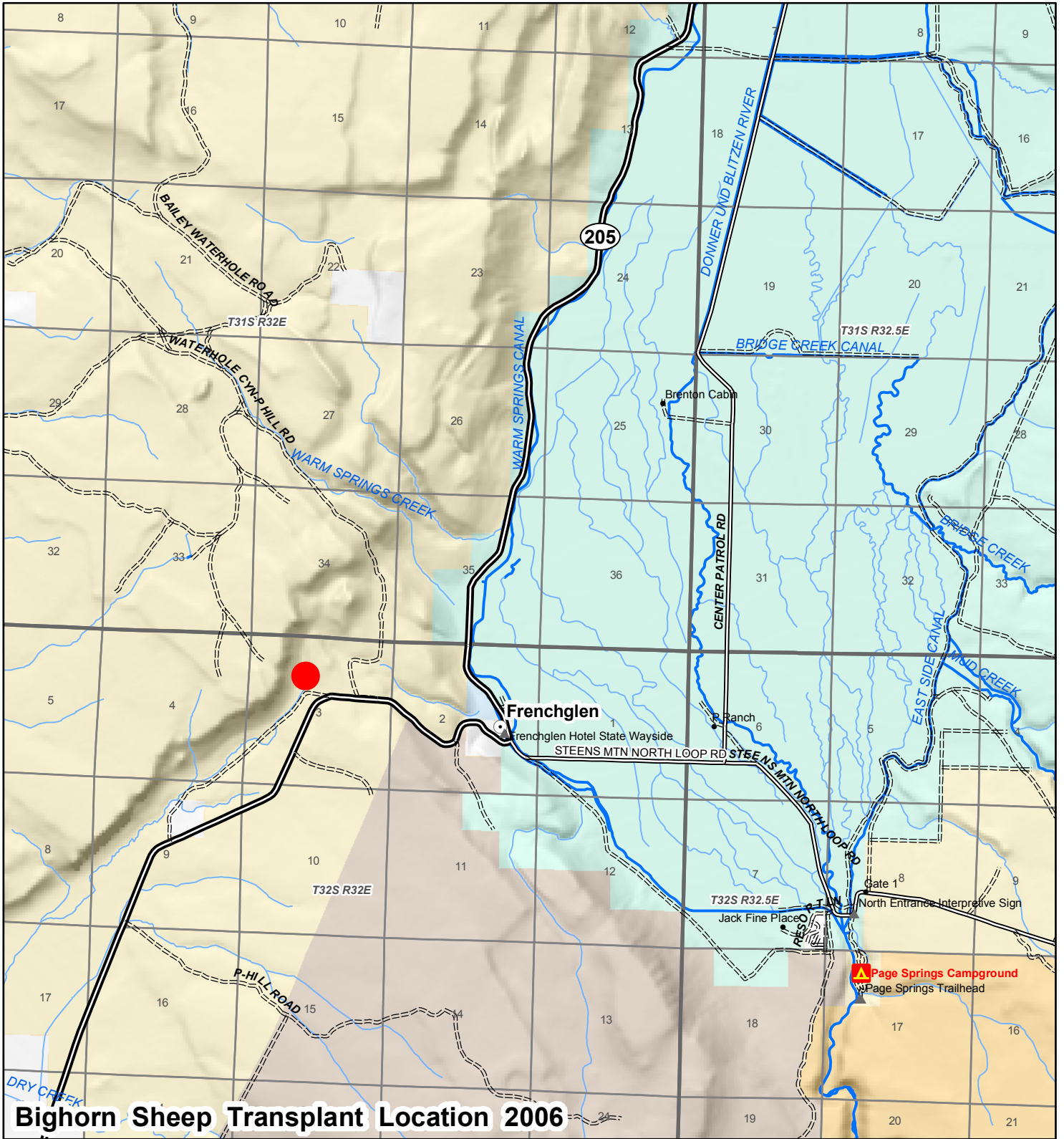
Scott Thomas, District Archaeologist

B. Persons, Groups, and Agencies Consulted

The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife

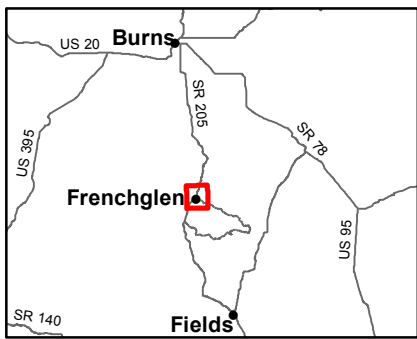
C. Literature Cited

Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife. 2003. Oregon's bighorn sheep and Rocky Mountain goat management plan. Salem, Oregon, USA.



Bighorn Sheep Transplant Location 2006

- Bighorn Sheep Transplant Location
- Paved Road
- Non-Paved Improved Road
- Primitive or Unknown Road Condition
- Bureau of Land Management
- BLM Wilderness Study Area
- BLM Wilderness
- State
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife
- Private



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 November 6, 2006 For Matt Obradovich

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