

## Wild Sheep Policy Still a Work in Progress as Congress Nears Adjournment

Cody, Wyoming, USA. December 16, 2014 – After weeks of partisan wrangling and a high-pressure deadline to fund the federal government, the U.S. Congress passed the FY 2015 Omnibus spending package and the high-priority National Defense Authorization Act, to which was added many public lands and environmental riders. For wild sheep advocates, several items in these massive new laws and in the behind-the-scenes negotiations demonstrate that WSF and its allies and partners are making progress toward better stewardship of bighorns, but there is more work to do.

Of most interest to the Wild Sheep Foundation (WSF) and its members, the FY 2015 Appropriations Bill contains language identical to last year's Appropriations Bill urging federal agencies to collaborate on bighorn sheep research, stating:

"The Forest Service is urged to collaborate with the Bureau of Land Management and the Agricultural Research Service on research involving the risk of disease transmission between domestic and bighorn sheep."

"WSF and its members, Chapters, and Affiliates once again worked diligently to ensure the final appropriation language would not interfere with a science-based, clear, and inclusive process for reducing the risk of disease transmission from domestic sheep to bighorns," stated WSF President & CEO Gray N. Thornton. "Our outreach to colleagues in the domestic sheep industry was very helpful, and we are on track for vital follow-up work."

"The Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management need a single definitive policy that includes state wildlife agencies and knowledgeable stakeholders in finding where the greatest risks are, which areas we will focus on, and how to separate domestic sheep to a safe distance from bighorns, with the least necessary disruption of sheep producers' business," said Thornton. WSF relied on its 2011 policy on domestic sheep and goats and wild sheep in talks with the American Sheep Industry Association, Thornton added, saying these talks were productive and should continue.

WSF Conservation Director Kevin Hurley said, "We believe there is mutual interest in having the U.S. Forest Service efficiently conduct and complete their ongoing Risk-of-Contact assessments, transparently share their findings with involved stakeholders, and swiftly implement pro-active strategies to lessen the likelihood of contact and potential disease transmission, while minimizing the hurdles of displacing domestic sheep grazing permittees."

Between the funding bill and the defense bill, several related items also passed. Congress has instructed federal agencies to "fully utilize" state fish and wildlife agency data as a "primary source" to inform federal decisions; this will be helpful to Risk-of-Contact assessments and decisions. Congress rejected a proposal from USDA Agricultural Research Service (ARS) to close the U.S. Sheep Experiment Station and other facilities; WSF expects to remain engaged in USSES talks in the coming year. On grazing permits and trailing, several issues dealing with level and backlog of environmental review, and duration and timing of permit renewals remain of concern to WSF. Language in the bills also require challenges to grazing permits to go through all administrative review before a person or party may file a lawsuit. Other language urges the land agencies to make vacant grazing allotments available "to the greatest extent practicable" to holders of permits that become unusable because of drought or wildfire.

"As the new Congress is seated in early January 2015, much work remains to be done on these issues," Thornton noted. "A focused, concerted effort involving our wild sheep supporters and members will be critical to having our voices heard in Washington; we invite all those interested in wild sheep conservation to join us," stated Thornton. "During the 2015 WSF Sheep Show in Reno, NV January 8-10th, additional discussions will occur among and between WSF and our Chapters and Affiliates, to help focus and prioritize our efforts during the coming year," added Hurley.

The Wild Sheep Foundation, formerly the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep (FNAWS,) was founded in 1977 by wild sheep conservationists and enthusiasts. WSF is dedicated to enhancing wild sheep populations, promoting professional wildlife management, educating the public and youth on sustainable use and the conservation benefits of hunting while promoting the interests of the hunter and all stakeholders. With a membership of more than 5,600 worldwide and a Chapter and Affiliate network in North America and Europe, WSF is the premier advocate for wild sheep, other mountain wildlife, their habitat, and their conservation. Since forming in 1977, the Wild Sheep Foundation and its chapters and affiliates have raised and expended more than \$95 million on conservation, education and conservation advocacy programs in North America, Europe and Asia. These and other efforts have resulted in a three-fold increase in bighorn sheep populations in North America from their historic 1950-70s lows of ~25,000 to ~80,000 today.

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