**The Purpose and Need for Bighorn Sheep Management**

Zion National Park, in conjunction with the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (UDWR), proposes to perform management actions on desert bighorn sheep within the Park. Desert bighorn, a native species, were previously extirpated and reintroduced to the Park in 1973, and have grown to a herd size of more than 500 animals within their habitat on and off of Zion National Park. Since the core population exists both within and outside the Park, UDWR will perform management actions both inside and outside of the Park; however, this proposal will focus on management actions within the Park.

Disease is one of the foremost concerns in bighorn sheep management. Contact between bighorn sheep and domestic sheep or goats (all of which are behaviorally attracted to each other) can lead to outbreaks of respiratory disease and may have long-term impacts on population levels of bighorn sheep. Population declines have also occurred in the apparent absence of contact with domestic sheep or goats. Such declines have been attributed to various factors, including disease transmission from adjacent bighorn herds, high densities and related nutritional issues, human disturbance, loss of habitat, weather conditions, and infection with parasites such as lungworm or mites.

Active desert bighorn sheep management is considered necessary to reduce risk of disease transmission and catastrophic die-offs of bighorn populations. The National Park Service and UDWR share a common objective to protect established bighorn sheep populations following the Utah Statewide Bighorn Sheep Management Plan and the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (WAFWA) Wild Sheep Working Group publication, "Recommendations for Domestic Sheep and Goat Management in Wild Sheep Habitat." Most commonly, bighorn sheep population numbers are managed through hunting or using transplant efforts in order to reduce localized densities. Hunting is not a legislated purpose of the Park, therefore a trap and transfer process would be one potential management option. The frequency and number of bighorn captured typically varies between 20 and 100 sheep for each transplant effort, but would be variable and dependent on local conditions, herd demographics, and the agency level of concern about disease transmission. These bighorn would be transplanted to supplement an existing small herd or start a new population, but with the primary objective of protecting the source herd.

The Park will prepare an Environmental Assessment (EA) in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) to provide a decision-making framework that explores a reasonable range of alternatives to meet project objectives, evaluates potential issues and impacts to Park resources and values, and identifies mitigation measures to lessen the degree or extent of these impacts.

**About the Desert Bighorn Sheep Habitat in Zion**

Habitat preferred by the desert bighorn sheep is largely found in the southeast quadrant of the park and surrounding lands where there is a combination of steep and open terrain to escape predators, palatable vegetation, and water. The Zion-Mt. Carmel Highway winds its way through this area and provides visitors with bighorn viewing opportunities. Wildlife observation of bighorn sheep is one of the Outstandingly Remarkable Values associated with the Virgin River Wild and Scenic River designation of 2009. Management of this herd for a healthy population would support the associated comprehensive management plan. The bighorn habitat is also within an area that has been formally designated as Wilderness by Congress since the time the animals were reintroduced. Management actions associated with the bighorn population will also be evaluated against the regulations of The Wilderness Act.

This bighorn herd is considered a wildlife restoration success story, but experts from the agencies now think that the herd needs to be actively managed to increase the chances of keeping it healthy. Bighorn that seek out habitat away from the core herd, primarily immature rams, are socially attracted to the behavior of domestic sheep and goats. These domestic animals can transfer non-native diseases back into the core herd that may result in devastating die-offs. Bighorn sheep have recently been observed within the communities of Springdale and Hilldale, and other areas outside the Park where domestic sheep and goats are active, prompting the need for bighorn management action to prevent interactions between these animals.

**Possible Actions**

The EA will evaluate, at a minimum, the following alternatives for desert bighorn management:

No Action Alternative

This alternative would continue the existing conditions, against which the other alternatives can be evaluated.

The Proposed Action: Bighorn Population Management through Periodic Removal of Animals

The proposed action is to primarily use net-gun capture and helicopter removal, but other disease control methods will also be evaluated. Reducing bighorn densities in core areas would diminish the likelihood for animals to disperse or move from the area. Direct reduction through hunting is not an option because hunting was not an established or authorized purpose of Zion National Park by Congress. The use of aircraft for management actions within this Wilderness area would be evaluated.

The public is invited to propose additional, feasible alternatives, and information they feel important for the agencies to consider in the development of the alternatives.

**Please Help by Participating**

The NPS encourages public participation during the NEPA process. The public has two opportunities to formally participate: during this initial public scoping period and during future public review of the EA. At this time, we invite you to help identify concerns and to express any ideas or comments regarding bighorn sheep management. Comments submitted during this initial public scoping period will help the NPS identify concerns, develop alternatives, and guide the analysis during preparation of the EA.

**Submit public scoping comments by March 19, 2014.**

We prefer to receive your comments by submitting them online to <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/zion>

Or, mail them to: Superintendent, Attention: Bighorn Management EA, Zion National Park, Springdale, UT 84767