



**GALLATIN WILDLIFE
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Protecting Habitat Conserving Fish and Wildlife

Cottonwood Environmental Law Center

The Honorable Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary of Agriculture
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

July 8, 2014

Re: Closure of U.S. Sheep Experiment Station, Idaho and Montana.

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

We support your decision to close the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Sheep Experiment Station, based in Dubois, Idaho. The sheep station, which affects over 100,000 acres of the greater Yellowstone ecosystem in Idaho and Montana, harms grizzly bears, gray wolves, bighorn sheep, sage grouse and other wildlife, and also puts herders' lives at risk to grizzlies that are drawn to the sheep. Its impacts on wildlife and its management's disdain for public involvement have embroiled the sheep station in litigation and controversy since 2007. Closure is certainly the best solution.

We urge you to transfer the sheep station's lands to the nearby Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge. We also urge you to permanently close to livestock grazing the associated Forest Service allotments used by the sheep station, and to

work with Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell to permanently close the Bureau of Land Management allotment used by the station.

The sheep station not only affects Yellowstone's wildlife directly, it also isolates wolves, grizzly bears, lynx and other wide-ranging animals by increasing risks to them in the best wildlife-travel corridor between Yellowstone and the wildlands of central Idaho, the Centennial Mountains. As the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee explains, "this corridor is especially important . . . because grizzly bears are unlikely to reach the Bitterroot [ecosystem, in Idaho] by any other path." Similarly, two packs of wolves, whose Yellowstone population is similarly isolated from wolves in central Idaho and northwestern Montana, were destroyed over conflicts with the sheep station. Isolated populations are at greater risk of inbreeding and resulting genetic infirmities.

Closing the sheep station would also protect human life. Though sheep were removed elsewhere from the greater Yellowstone ecosystem, the remaining sheep at the station and associated Forest Service and BLM allotments jeopardize the sheepherders, as evidenced by two known incidents of grizzly bears chasing herders – who are generally immigrants and are paid less than minimum wage for their time. Hiring economically and socially disempowered minority sheepherders for such a risky job is particularly unfair.

In closing, we request that all sheep grazing on federal lands associated with the sheep station cease immediately and that you employ your authority to permanently vacate and close the associated allotments to protect Grizzly bear, bighorn sheep and other wildlife. Finally, we request that you convey the remaining lands to the tenure of the Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Bryan Bird, Wild Places Program Director
WildEarth Guardians
For

Glenn Hockett, President
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John Meyer, Executive Director
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CC:

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The Honorable Sally Jewell
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Members of the Senate Appropriations and Energy and Natural Resources Committees
Members of House Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture