

File Code: 1950/2620

Date: March 25, 2008

Dear Friend of the Ashley,

The Flaming Gorge Ranger District is seeking your input on a proposal to conduct a bighorn sheep habitat improvement project on the Flaming Gorge National Recreation Area. This letter provides you with information on the purpose of and need for the project, the proposed action, as well as information on how and where to submit your comments regarding this proposal.

Background

Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep (*Ovis canadensis canadensis*) were reintroduced on Bare Top Mountain in 1983- 1984. Other reintroductions, since 1984 to present, have also occurred near Red Canyon, Sheep Creek Canyon, and at Little Hole along the Green River Corridor. Historically, Native Americans used fire to maintain desired habitat for game species such as bighorn sheep (Greenwood et. al. 1999). Over the years various treatments have been applied to Bare Top Mountain to improve and expand bighorn sheep habitat. This project, outlined below, would expand on some of these previously treated areas and provide routes for the sheep down to the reservoir.

Proposed Action

The project area includes shrub lands and conifer forest ecotones having scattered but increasing numbers of conifers, primarily juniper. All units (refer to attached maps) fall within the Flaming Gorge National Recreation Area, administered by the Flaming Gorge Ranger District of the Ashley National Forest. These vegetation types provide habitat for a variety of grass- and shrub-dependent species. They also provide high valued habitat for bighorn sheep. The encroachment of conifers, mainly juniper, into these vegetation types is resulting in the gradual displacement of grass and brush plant communities. As the number and size of conifers increase, habitat values for bighorn sheep decreases. Removing conifers, focusing mainly on juniper removal, will maintain the proposed treatment areas as shrub and grass ecotones supporting more than one plant community.

The treatments will typically include:

1. Lopping and scattering the conifer, with a focusing on juniper, on the slopes along the Flaming Gorge Reservoir.
2. Prescribe burn the slopes containing the downed tree species to promote regeneration of grasses and forbs generally after one year.



Purpose and Need

The project is designed to maintain and improve habitat for bighorn sheep and to maintain habitat diversity and stand structure in shrub and grassland communities by removing conifer encroachment into the shrub and grassland vegetation types along the Flaming Gorge Reservoir. Local research has shown that burned areas, within or adjacent to steep rocky habitat and within core use area has higher bighorn sheep use than non burned areas (Greenwood et al. 1999). Less use was observed in this study at sites with dense standing dead pinyon-juniper (Greenwood et al. 1999). The proposed treatment units are within the core use area of Three Corners and West Daggett herd units for bighorn sheep. These rocky slopes are used as escape and lamping terrain. Less use is occurring on the slopes of the reservoir, primarily because of the dense stands of conifer on these slopes. Predation by cougars has been a significant problem for these sheep herds. Removal of conifer would increase the visibility for bighorn sheep to detect predators. Clearing the slopes of the dense juniper would also connect some of the existing burn areas on top, and on both sides of the reservoir.

Decision Framework

Based on the public comments received and the resulting analysis, the responsible official will determine whether significant issues or concerns exist. The responsible official will also determine:

- The appropriate mitigation measures to employ in protecting resources in the immediate project area.
- The appropriate level of environmental analysis documentation.

Request for Comment and Legal Notice of Proposed Action

You are invited to offer comments at this time. Comments that are specific to, and have a direct relationship to the proposed action, and include supporting reasons that the Responsible Official should consider in reaching a decision are most helpful.

Send your written comments to: Jeff Schramm, District Ranger, Flaming Gorge Ranger District, P.O. Box 279, Manila, Utah 84046. Jeff Schramm is the Responsible Official for this project. He can also be reached at (435) 781-5263. Comments may also be hand delivered to the Flaming Gorge Ranger District, 25 W. Hwy. 43, Manila, Utah, during regular business hours of 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., Monday-Friday, excluding federal holidays. Electronic comments should be sent to comments-intermtn-ashley@fs.fed.us. It would be most useful for the forest to receive your electronic comments in Microsoft word (*.doc) or rich text format (*.rtf). Those using electronic means may submit a scanned signature. Otherwise, another means of verifying the identity of the individual or organizational representative may be necessary for electronically submitted comments or comments received by phone. This is pursuant to 36 CFR 215.6(a)(3)(B).

The opportunity to comment ends 30 days following the date of publication of the legal notice in the newspaper of record which is the Vernal Express. Only those who submit timely comments will be accepted as appellants. Comments received in response to this

notice, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record for this project.

If you have any questions regarding this project, please contact Diane Probasco at (435) 781-5280 or Fax (435) 781-5295.

Thank you for your interest and participation in the management of the Ashley National Forest.

Sincerely,

Jeff E. Schramm
JEFF E. SCHRAMM
District Ranger