



February 17, 2017

Mono County Board of Supervisors
PO Box 715
Bridgeport, California 93517

RE: Conway Grazing RFP

Dear Honorable Members of the Mono County Board:

Friends of the Inyo is pleased to have the opportunity to comment on the Sierra Nevada Bighorn Sheep (SNBS). Our mission is to ensure the public lands of the Eastern Sierra exist in an intact, healthy natural state for present and future generations of people and wildlife. We represent over 700 members from across the Eastern Sierra, the state and beyond. We have been involved in issues facing SNBS since the early days of the recovery effort and recently worked on providing comments to the Inyo National Forest on SNBS as part of the May 2016 Draft Revised Land Management Plan.

We are pleased to see the Board will hear a presentation from CDFW on the science and status of SNBS. The decision following that presentation is whether or not to continue domestic sheep grazing at Conway Ranch. Friends of the Inyo believes domestic grazing of sheep threatens the recovery of the SNBS, a unique and endangered species. Saving and restoring the planet's biodiversity is crucial given all of the emerging threats to our wildlife, such as climate change. There is more intrinsic value to the SNBS than grazing domestic sheep. According to the California Department of Fish and Wildlife website:

The Sierra Nevada Bighorn Sheep was listed as an endangered species on January 3, 2000, following emergency listing on April 20, 1999, under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA). In 1999, they also were moved from threatened to endangered status under the California Endangered Species Act (CESA).

Under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), management of Sierra Nevada Bighorn Sheep is guided by the [Sierra Nevada Bighorn Sheep Recovery Plan \(PDF\)](#). California Department of Fish and Wildlife is the lead agency jointly with U. S. Fish & Wildlife Service, in collaboration with National Park Service, BLM, U. S. Forest Service, and USDA Wildlife Services. The recovery actions being implemented by the agencies include (1) Management of disease risk from domestic sheep, (2) translocations (augmentations and reintroductions) to increase bighorn numbers and their geographic distribution, (3) predator management to limit predation on bighorn sheep, and (4) monitoring and management of genetic SNBHS variation.

Major threats to the SNBHS are [Disease from domestic sheep and goats](#), habitat changes resulting from vegetation succession, predation, inbreeding depression (low genetic diversity), and small population size (causing increased effects from weather, climate,

avalanches and other unpredictable natural events) threaten the recovery of Sierra Nevada Bighorn Sheep. The potential for these factors to interact and reduce demographic rates (survival and reproduction) is termed an extinction vortex. The concern is that a Sierra Nevada bighorn sheep population with insufficient survival and reproduction will decline in numbers and go extinct if the factors causing the decline are not reversed.

As stated, the Sierra Nevada bighorn is an endangered species and iconic animal of the Eastern Sierra.

The SNBS should be embraced and promoted by Mono County for their incomparable wildlife value as part of the County's "Wild By Nature" motto. These majestic and remarkable animals are a draw for tourists, hikers and wildlife photographers. Observing them in the wild is an unforgettable experience. CDFW, Yosemite National Park and other agencies and partners have gone to great effort and expense to restore SNBS in their native range. We request Mono County support the efforts of its cooperating agencies and help facilitate the recovery of these magnificent animals.

There is a large body of evidence published in peer-reviewed literature that documents the fatal health risk that domestic sheep (and goats) pose to the SNBS. Refer to the Bighorn Sheep Disease Research Consortium at <http://bighornhealth.org> where it states: *Pneumonia is one of the biggest hurdles limiting the comeback of bighorn sheep in western North America. People have known about the disease since the 1990's, but progress in identifying the causative agent has been slow. Domestic sheep and goats brought in to graze in bighorn sheep habitat introduce pneumonia to wild sheep. Attempts to manage the disease in bighorn sheep are costly and frustrating and have met with limited success.*

Therefore, domestic sheep grazing was identified as one of the primary issues of concern in the SNBS Recovery Plan that could adversely affect recovery efforts. Courts in other states have recognized the high risk of disease being transferred from domestic sheep to wild bighorn, and federal agencies have closed allotments to domestic sheep grazing as a result. We are concerned that if the County reauthorizes sheep grazing there could likely be costly litigation; taxpayer dollars that are better spent managing the property for the values outlined in the conservation easement.

Friends of the Inyo believes one of Conway Ranch's greatest assets is its visual characteristic as a classic eastside meadow important to locals and visitors as part of Mono County's heritage and supports vital wildlife habitat in the Mono Basin. We would like to see the County explore best practices for management of the Conway meadow that are fiscally and *ecologically* responsible. This may include cattle grazing under diligent management but other management tools may be effective as well.

In conclusion, Friends of the Inyo respectfully asks that you do not approve domestic sheep grazing at Conway Ranch. Despite the low probability of contact, exposing the endangered Sierra Nevada Bighorn to the slightest possibility of disease is not acceptable. We hope that you will explore alternative management practices, however if you do support an RFP for cattle grazing consider it carefully and confer with specialists as to best management

practices for this meadow ecosystem which supports other important species such as Sage Grouse and Mule Deer.

Friends of the Inyo is honored to participate in these important conversations and to preserve our public lands and its wildlife for current and future generations. Thank you for considering our comments.

Respectfully,

Jora Fogg, Preservation Manager
Sam Roberts, President