

What's Wrong With Game-Farming Non-native Mountain Goats in Wilderness? By Jeff Smith

Earlier this summer the U.S. Forest Service published an environmental assessment (EA) on the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources' (UDWR) proposal to land helicopters 60 times to capture and collar mountain goats and bighorn sheep in three Wildernesses. The National Environmental Policy Act requires this assessment, which is meant to be an honest examination of the proposal's environmental impacts.

Utah wildlife biologists are worried about the failure of transplanted mountain goats to thrive in their new home, 53,000 acres of wilderness on the Wasatch Front, with Salt Lake City to the west and seven major ski areas immediately east. They want to build sustaining populations large enough to permit more hunting in the Twin Peak, Lone Peak, and Mount Timpanogos Wildernesses.

Several months ago, Utah requested permission to capture mountain goats, but because they aren't native it was virtually impossible to show the project was necessary to benefit the Wildernesses. It now appears UDWR is piggybacking bighorn sheep onto the project to make it appear it might help a native species. Even if capturing bighorns could be justified, roughly two-thirds of their range lies outside the Wilderness and they could be captured there.



*Collared mountain goat by Tom Driggers via Flickr.
Bighorn sheep capture by James Marvin Phelps via Flickr.*

If Utah is concerned about a decline in the mountain goat population, it should stop hunting them and undertake a habitat analysis to assess whether the non-native goats have run their course.

Wilderness Watch has closely tracked the project, commenting on two different "scoping" letters. Last month, we filed a 21-page comment letter calling the project "antithetical to the preservation of wilderness."

"Net-Gunning" 20 Goats and 10 Bighorns

Utah's management plans describe mountain goats and bighorn sheep as "once-in-a-lifetime species" for hunters. Mountain goats are not native, and all individuals in Utah stem from introductions that began in 1967. There were six transplants on the Wasatch Front, 42 goats over 50 years, and biologists hoped to build a population of 125 animals.

But the goats had different ideas. The population peaked at 65 in 2007 and has since declined to around 35 animals.

These goats know a good thing when they see one and rarely leave Wilderness. In 2015, for instance, biologists sighted goats 164 times, but they observed them only eight times outside Wilderness boundaries.

So, this fall, the state wants to fly helicopters where the goats find "optimal habitat." A UDWR team would spend two to four days in designated Wilderness, capturing 20 mountain goats and 10

bighorns. The team would "net-gun" the animals from the air, and land to "process" the animals, taking blood samples and fitting them with radio collars. The ground team would then free the animals, and the helicopter would land again to pick up the team to move to the next capture.

In this part of Utah, mountain goats, bighorn sheep, and domestic sheep live "sympatrically," sharing the broad geography and perhaps the *mycoplasma ovipneumoniae*

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Message from the President



As I write this, smoke from wildfires (lightning- and human-caused) has blanketed much of the US Pacific Northwest and Northern Rockies for over a month. Fires from BC, Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and Montana, coupled with odd wind patterns, keep up the haze. Fire is a natural process, even if we don't always like it. It has shaped, shapes, and will continue to shape, Wilderness over much of the US.

This is not intended to be a message addressing fire ecology per se. There are numerous studies, some of them contradictory, that address the issue of whether large fires (be they in or out of Wilderness) are burning outside of historic patterns, due to global warming or past fire suppression. (For northern Idaho where I live, fires, like in 1889 and 1910, can naturally be very, very big and hot; other places may not be the same). Rather, it is about how the federal agencies with wilderness administration responsibilities view natural processes, like fire, and how it seems they are deciding that they know what is best for Wilderness even if it violates the Wilderness Act. The idea of untrammelled Wilderness seems to be fading within the agencies.

In many Wildernesses the federal agencies want to determine when and where fires burn. It seems the agencies believe Wilderness has either too little or too much fire, according to their tastes, often in the same Wilderness. This occurs not merely in the areas near communities, but also a considerable distance from towns and private land. There seems to be a desire to "control" the process; trammel Wilderness; shape it to their idea of what it should be.

This is not the only example of ecological manipulation in Wilderness. There are current proposals to helicopter mountain goats out of the Olympic Wilderness in Washington and put them into Wilderness elsewhere in the Cascades to boost huntable populations. In Utah, the Forest Service proposes helicopter capture of non-native mountain goats to assess their health, with the goal of increasing their numbers for hunters. The agencies try to justify these seemingly contradictory approaches as making Wilderness better. More non-native mountain goats are better in Wildernesses in Utah's Wasatch Mountains, but are a problem in the Olympics. There seems to be no rhyme or reason to these proposals other than a desire by the agencies to manipulate Wilderness.

The idea of real Wilderness, wild Wilderness—unfortunately, not a redundancy, judging from how the agencies often operate—is being swept aside in the collective mind of the agencies charged with administering Wilderness. In an era of global warming, we can expect to see more kinds of manipulation. Perhaps we will see proposals to introduce non-native species in Wilderness, based upon assumptions about changes in habitat due to warming. While some of this may be well-intended, one should not forget the federal agencies that now administer Wilderness were among the most ardent opponents of the Wilderness Act. That institutional memory remains and is now gaining ascendancy over the public-minded attitude to meet the letter and spirit of the Wilderness Act, which held more sway in the past.

The challenge we face today is not unlike the challenge faced by those who dreamed up and passed the Wilderness Act and established the Wilderness System—overcoming our society's inability to leave some places alone. Wilderness Watch will continue to fight for the untrammelled and unmanipulated Wilderness promised by the 1964 Wilderness Act. That's what Wilderness is supposed to be, even if the federal agencies can't manipulate these wild areas for their own convenience or for their own tastes. Fires will burn in Wilderness, and wildlife populations may not be herded, drugged, and helicoptered away by the agencies, but Wilderness deserves the chance to be truly wild. ♪

—Gary MacFarlane



WILDERNESS WATCH

Keeping Wilderness Wild

The *Wilderness Watcher* is the quarterly newsletter of Wilderness Watch, America's leading conservation organization dedicated solely to protecting the lands and waters in the National Wilderness Preservation System.

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bacterium, a respiratory pathogen. At times, the bighorns intersect with domestic sheep, which the Forest Service permits to graze in the nearby national forest. The spread of pneumonia from domestic to wild sheep is a significant problem in Utah and almost wiped out a whole herd of bighorns in the Deseret Peak Wilderness. At other times, the bighorns intersect with the mountain goats in the alpine meadows.

There is no mention of adjusting grazing permits for the domestic sheep in the EA, which would seem a logical first step in helping to increase the population. Instead, the agency wants helicopters landing in Wilderness and blood samples to confirm strains of pneumonia crossing between the three species. Animal collars are meant to provide better data on migrations. Biologists also want a more precise understanding of the causes of death, and they want to discover which of the three species acts as disease vector.

Standing Up for Wilderness

In our comment letter, Wilderness Watch's attorney, Dana Johnson, builds a powerful rebuttal to the UDWR's case. Repeated and intensive helicopter intrusions and radio-collaring, she writes, "violate the very core of the Wilderness Act." Moreover, the Forest Service's EA narrows the choice to one "fore-ordained formality" that fails to "rigorously explore and objectively evaluate all reasonable alternatives".

The irony here is that, while it's a very positive thing that UDWR recognizes federal Wilderness as "optimal habitat" for goats, the state agency sees no problem degrading Wilderness to achieve its research goal: as Johnson paraphrases it, "to investigate possible population declines of an introduced species managed by the State primarily for recreational sport hunting opportunities."

The Forest Service has a memorandum of understanding with UDWR to allow wildlife research on the lands it manages, but that must change at the Wilderness boundary. Congress intended—and the courts have reinforced—that the Forest Service not let state agencies weaken its authority over Wilderness.

Wilderness Watch's concerns also include:

- Federal managers can only allow exceptions like helicopters and net-gunning in Wilderness if such actions are necessary to preserve the wilderness character. The "under-performance of bighorn sheep and mountain goats in the Wasatch" is not a necessity to jettison the Wilderness Act.
- The Forest Service uses an artifice not found in the Wilderness Act—"the five qualities of wilderness"—to dilute wilderness standards to allow UDWR's project. The agency declares goats "natural", one of the five qualities, and therefore surmises protecting and propagating this quality overcomes the general prohibition on aircraft, motor vehicles and installations. The Act is a triumph of plain language: It prohibits machines and wildlife manipulations.

- Allowing helicopters for this project would make the Wilderness Act's prohibition against machines meaningless. With this precedent, the agencies "could approve helicopter-assisted research any time the data obtained might help a state agency better understand wildlife population dynamics."
- The Forest Service uses one unconfirmed report from 1918 to imply that mountain goats are in the Wasatch Range. But the Forest Service's own documents state mountain goats were introduced to Utah for trophy hunting.
- The Forest Service ignores studies suggesting that helicopters adversely affect bighorn sheep and mountain goats. The project could exacerbate population declines.
- The National Environmental Policy Act requires the Forest Service to "[r]igorously explore and objectively evaluate all reasonable alternatives" to a proposed action. In other cases the courts have ruled that the agency must "weigh the relevant factors" in their assessments. The agency, in a wily, deeply flawed EA, often artfully avoids the essential questions. Have hunters killed too many? Has forage quality declined since the goats were first transplanted 50 years ago? How do disturbances such as hunters, hikers, and low-flying aircraft already affect the herd? Are there protective measures to shield the goats and bighorns from domestic livestock diseases? Could samples from animals killed by hunters provide answers on pneumonia strains? Could biologists in the field using old-fashioned shoe leather, binoculars, and notebooks gather the migration and mortality data to preclude the use of radio collars? We don't know. We can't answer any of these questions because, in this EA, "the evaluation of other potentially detrimental impacts" is "outside the scope of this analysis."
- The amount and seriousness of environmental impacts necessitates that the Forest Service deny authorization for the proposed project or fully explore the direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts in a full-blown environmental impact statement.

The Next Steps

The UDWR originally wanted to fly helicopters in either September or November this year, but the Forest Service decision-making may delay that schedule.

The Forest Service will issue a "proposed decision" sometime in the near future. Wilderness Watch will then have 30 days to "object" if we so choose. The agency will then analyze our objections and those brought by others and announce a final decision. At that point Wilderness Watch and our potential allies will determine whether to move our concerns to federal court. 🌀

Jeff Smith is the membership/development director for Wilderness Watch and wishes he could still carry as big a pack as he did when he first came to Montana in 1974. He moonlights as the co-chair of 350 Montana, an all-volunteer climate activist group.

Wilderness in Congress

The news about Wilderness in Congress continues to be grim. Here are three updates on bills that threaten Wilderness:

Sportsmen's Heritage and Recreational Enhancement (SHARE) Act

A discussion draft circulated in the House this past June has the same wilderness-damaging provisions as last year's bill that passed the full House. It would effectively repeal the Wilderness Act by allowing all kinds of habitat manipulations and motorized uses for anything even remotely connected to fishing, hunting, shooting, or fish and wildlife management. The sportsmen's bills so far introduced in the Senate do not include these provisions.

Border Bills

At least two border bills threaten Wilderness. HR 3548, the Border Security for America Act (McCaul, R-TX), would

waive the 1964 Wilderness Act and 35 other federal laws within 100 miles of both the northern and southern borders so that U.S. Customs and Border Protection would not have to follow these laws. HR 3593, the Secure Our Borders and Wilderness Act (Johnson, R-LA), would directly amend the 1964 Wilderness Act to allow access to structures, installations, and roads; use motor vehicles; use and land aircraft; deploy "temporary" infrastructure, including forward operating bases; and construct and maintain roads.

Izembek Road

The bill (HR 218/S. 101) to force a land exchange and build a road through the heart of the Izembek Wilderness in Alaska passed the full House of Representatives on July 20 and is pending in the Senate. The Alaska Congressional delegation is pushing this bill hard, and it also has the support of the Trump Administration. 🐾

Wilderness in the Courts

Victory for Izembek but more battles ahead

In 2009, Congress passed the Omnibus Public Land Management Act, which contained a provision allowing the Secretary of Interior to consider exchanging lands in the Izembek Wilderness and National Wildlife Refuge for lands owned by the State of Alaska and the King Cove Corporation. The exchange would enable construction of a road through the heart of the Izembek Wilderness to connect King Cove with Cold Bay, Alaska. The proposed road would cut through the largest eelgrass beds in the world as well as important grizzly, caribou, and salmon habitat. After NEPA review, the Secretary rejected the proposal noting that "construction of a road through the [] Refuge would lead to significant degradation of irreplaceable ecological resources...." King Cove, along with the State of Alaska, challenged the Secretary's decision in Federal District Court, and Wilderness Watch and our allies intervened to support the Secre-

tary's decision. The District Court found that the Secretary's decision was well-reasoned considering the environmental impacts, and King Cove and the State of Alaska appealed to the Ninth Circuit. Just before oral arguments, and after full briefing, King Cove and the State of Alaska announced that they were withdrawing their appeal. This leaves the District Court's opinion in place—a victory for the Izembek Wilderness—but we know the fight is not over.

On July 20, the House of Representatives approved new land-exchange legislation that would trade off 206 acres of federally protected refuge and wilderness land for state land, stripping wilderness protection in the heart of the Refuge. Senator Murkowski has introduced a companion bill in the Senate. Stay tuned for updates. 🐾

Court holds firm on elk and wolf collaring injunction in the River of No Return

You might recall from our spring newsletter (<https://tinyurl.com/ycda95ty>) that the State of Idaho and the Forest Service asked the Idaho District Court to reconsider its injunction requiring the agencies to destroy data obtained from illegally placed elk and wolf collars in the River of No Return Wilderness and to delay implementation of any future helicopter projects in the Wilderness for

at least 90 days to allow for judicial review. We are pleased to announce that the court held firm to its injunction with only a minor clarification that the 90-day project delay applies to helicopter operations for wildlife management purposes. We will continue to defend this important victory and use it as a model for protecting other Wildernesses from heavy-handed wildlife manipulation. 🐾

On the Watch

Other Ways to Cross a River



Photo: U.S. Forest Service

Despite opposition from Wilderness Watch and others, the Forest Service decided to re-construct the large and incredibly visually intrusive Hawks Rest bridge over the Yellowstone River in the Teton Wilderness in Wyoming. The Teton Wilderness lies within the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, and this part of the Wilderness has the unique distinction of being the most remote area in the lower 48 states, in terms of distance from a road.

In our scoping comments, we offered several alternatives to rebuilding this structure, including two fords downriver as well as alternative routes to reach Bridger Lake. If the bridge was to be rebuilt, we urged the agency to use traditional, non-motorized tools and means to accomplish the work, and to look at more appropriate locations for a bridge.

We believe the Forest Service's Categorical Exclusion (CE) is unlawful for this project authorizing multiple prohibited uses in a designated Wilderness, including the construction of a permanent structure that will remain on the landscape for decades.

BREAKING NEWS: As this newsletter was going to print, the Forest Service announced it is dropping its plans for now to use a helicopter to drop a 172-foot steel bridge at the site. It remains to be seen what the final bridge looks like and whether or not it is helicoptered in. Wilderness Watch will continue to work to protect this part of the Teton Wilderness. ♪

20-Year Mining Moratorium Proposed Near Boundary Waters



Photo: Kevin Proescholdt

The comment period on the proposed withdrawal of federal lands and minerals from mineral exploration and mining in the watershed of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW) in northeastern Minnesota closed Aug. 17. The U.S. Forest Service (FS) and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) are proposing a 20-year mining moratorium on about 234,000 acres of public land. This follows BLM's notice to Twin Metals that its federal mineral leases would not be renewed, which Twin Metals needs for its massive proposed underground copper-nickel mine.

The Forest Service received over 125,000 comments, including 10,195 comments from Wilderness Watch members and supporters. Thanks to all who commented!

In addition, Wilderness Watch and our allies submitted a 155-page scoping comment letter detailing the number and types of environmental analyses that we believe the federal agencies should conduct during the two-year environmental review period, which would be conducted to support a 20-year withdrawal of federal lands and minerals in the BWCAW watershed. ♪

A Wilderness Win for Mount Washington



Photo: U.S. Geological Survey

The Willamette National Forest recently withdrew a draft decision on a proposal to conduct a “prescribed fire” in a portion the Mount Washington Wilderness in Oregon. Wilderness Watch, with Blue Mountains Biodiversity Project and BARK, filed a formal administrative objection to the Scott Mountain Prescribed Fire in Wilderness Environmental Assessment. The Forest Supervisor’s decision ended the objection process. While no reasons were given as to why the draft decision was withdrawn, the points we raised certainly played a role in that decision. For the time being, the Forest Service will not subject this portion of the Mount Washington Wilderness to intensive ecological manipulation. In addition to the manipulation, the Wilderness would have been marred by numerous helicopter flights to light fires in the Wilderness.

Mount Washington is one of the original Wildernesses set aside by the 1964 Wilderness Act. It lies in the central Cascade Range of Oregon between the Mount Jefferson and Three Sisters Wildernesses.

Read more on our blog: <https://tinyurl.com/y8c4xl3v> 🐾

Let Nature Shape the North Fork John Day Wilderness



Photo: U.S. Forest Service

Wilderness Watch and Blue Mountains Biodiversity Project are objecting to a plan to subject up to 9,557 acres of the North Fork John Day Wilderness in Oregon to prescribed burns. We recently submitted our objection to the Draft Record of Decision (ROD) for the Ten Cent Community Fire Protection Project Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS).

This project would violate the Wilderness Act and harm the wild character of the North Fork John Day Wilderness through extensive manipulation and by interfering with natural processes. The use of prescribed fire in the Wilderness will set a bad precedent that will open the door to increased manipulation (including ongoing prescribed burns) in this and other Wildernesses.

The Forest Service has failed to demonstrate the project is necessary for administering the area as Wilderness, and the agency’s justifications for it are based on faulty and scientifically controversial theories, including the effectiveness of fuels reduction to lessen future fire severity and threats to Wilderness values due to high-severity fires.

Wilderness Watch supports allowing lightning-caused fire to play its natural role in Wilderness. The Forest Service needs to drop this plan and instead allow natural fires to shape Wilderness. 🐾

WW Receives a Lasting, Impactful Gift

Roger and Margaret Harmon were modest but regular contributors over the 20 years they supported Wilderness Watch as members. They built a successful business in Los Angeles and took advantage of their vacations to become avid bird-watchers, backpackers, skiers, and travelers. They were curious about the natural world and kept close track of Wilderness Watch's work.

Margaret passed away in 2013. This summer, we were surprised when Roger's lawyer called. When he died at

the age of 91, Roger left a bequest, a gift written into his will, for Wilderness Watch. We were awe-struck when we realized the bequest was 95 percent larger than the cumulative amount Roger and Margaret had donated during their lives.

We are humbled and honored to have been among the organizations Roger and Margaret judged worthy of lasting, impactful support. We will put their legacy gift to good work on behalf of Wilderness. 🌿

A Shout-Out for New Members

If you've ever considered asking a friend to join Wilderness Watch, now is the time. Right now, an anonymous donor, a long-time WW member from Alaska, will match every first-time donation Wilderness Watch receives up to a total of \$10,000.

Everybody has a backpacking buddy or an uncle or aunt who's a "wild preservative," Edward Abbey's phrase for a wilderness lover. Give him/her a copy of this newsletter. Put a stamp on an envelope, fill in our address (P.O. Box 9175, Missoula, MT 59807), point to this page, and tell him/her it's time.

Sweeten your appeal with a little relevant recitation of Mr. Abbey himself:

"Refuse to participate in evil; insist on taking part in what is healthy, generous, and responsible. Stand up, speak out, and when necessary fight back. Get down off the fence and lend a hand, grab a-hold, be a citizen – not a subject."

Send that first donation now, and the secret multiplier will double it. All new donors can also go to our website and click on the DONATE button. 🌿

LOVE THE WILDERNESS? Help Us Keep It Wild!

Yes! I would like to make a contribution and help defend Wilderness!

Here is an extra donation to help protect Wilderness!

☐ \$250 ☐ \$100 ☐ \$50 ☐ \$30 ☐ \$ _____

I would like to become a member!

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Wilderness Watch has a New Logo!

We're excited to unveil our new logo. It features a grizzly bear, symbol of the wild, ever watchful in a protective stance. Our new logo better embodies Wilderness Watch and the work we do—a spirited group that remains steadfast in our efforts to defend our National Wilderness Preservation System.

We're selling t-shirts with our new logo. A Wilderness Watch t-shirt is a great way to show that you, too, are part of a spirited group that remains steadfast in protecting our National Wilderness Preservation System.

Order online: <https://tinyurl.com/ya65vk9u> 

Catch our Road Show with Noted Author and Ecologist George Wuerthner

Wilderness Watch is pleased to announce noted author, ecologist, and conservation activist George Wuerthner, our new Advocate-Organizer, will be hitting the road this fall and winter to raise awareness about Wilderness and the threats facing it. "Geo" will travel the country, talk about why we need Wilderness, help people better protect the Wildernesses in their backyards, and organize against congressional efforts to weaken or repeal the Wilderness Act.

The following are tentative tour dates (look for an updated list on our website as tour dates are confirmed):

10/2: Billings, MT
10/3: Billings, MT
10/12: Missoula, MT

11/14: Moscow, ID
11/15: Coeur d'Alene, ID
11/16: Sandpoint, ID

George also hopes to visit Boise, ID; Santa Fe, Silver City, Las Cruces, and Albuquerque, NM; and Santa Barbara, Arcata, and Bakersfield, CA.

If you would like to help organize or schedule a presentation in your community—to an organization or civic group to which you belong, a classroom, an open house or any other venue—please email info@wildernesswatch.org.

Hope to see you at one of the shows! 