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Sheep research station on USDA chopping block, again

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Sheep graze at the U.S. Sheep Experimental Station near Dubois, Idaho. USDA is proposing to close the under President Donald Trump's budget proposal.

USDA file photo

The U.S. Sheep Experiment Station at Dubois, Idaho, is one of 17 Agricultural Research

Service laboratories slated for closure under President Donald Trump's Department of Agriculture FY 2018 budget proposal.

The facility is operated by USDA in partnership with the University of Idaho, and is the only one in the U.S. doing research on range sheep. It was on USDA's chopping block twice before, in 2014 and 2015. It was spared both times in ag appropriations bills through efforts by Rep. Mike Simpson, R-Idaho.

The beleaguered facility had been the target of lawsuits by environmental groups claiming the its grazing activities are a source of wildlife conflict and possible disease transmission between domestic and wild sheep. It's also faced long vacancies in research positions, with USDA saying in 2014 it didn't have the funding to fill the positions while it was responding to those legal actions.

In 2015 then-USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack told Congress the proposed closure was due to a lack of financial and human resources at the location and costs associated with animal feed, infrastructure and staff.

Stakeholders, including industry and state and local governments, have tried for years to address the issues with USDA to secure the viability of the station and its continued research.

Jim Brown, public relations director for the Montana Wool Growers Association, said the

organization has worked really hard to keep the sheep station a viable federal research facility.

Keeping it from closure is something the industry faces again with the new administration. But Congress has always rejected its closure, stating support for the research being done there, he said.

Congress has the sole authority to set the federal budget.

Brown said it's a one-of-a-kind facility in the U.S. doing research on sheep breeding, range management, reproduction and wild/domestic sheep interaction.

"It would be irreplaceable. It would be devastating to lose that continuity," he said.

On Thursday, MWGA sent letters to Sen. Jon Tester, D-Mont., and Sen. Steve Daines, R-Mont., opposing Trump's budget proposal to close the station, stating the critical need for it to be fully funded to fill longstanding vacant positions.

The station covers about 48,000 acres on the Idaho-Montana border and has about 3,000 mature sheep plus young sheep of various ages. Its current budget is \$2.1 million, with a staff of 16 full-time federal and two University of Idaho employees, according to ARS.

Peter Orwick, executive director of the American Sheep Association, said there has to be room in the budget for the only ARS research facility in the country dedicated to the sheep industry.

News of the proposed closure caught the Idaho Wool Growers Association by surprise, said Barry Duelke, association president and a Buhl sheep producer.

"We had an extensive go-around battle essentially two or three years ago and we thought that was over with," he said.

Sheep producers have always supported the sheep station and will continue to do so, he

said.

“We will continue to fight for the survival of the Dubois station, I can assure you of that,” he said.

USDA Deputy Secretary Michael Young told reporters May 23 that USDA’s budget for research, education and economics includes \$2.5 billion in discretionary funding, a decrease of \$425 million from 2017.

“Within that funding there’s about \$1 billion for the Agricultural Research Service, the USDA laboratories. I would note there, there’s a cut of about \$142 million that would result in the closure of 17 of those laboratories out of the total of 90,” he said.