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It's time to move the U.S. Sheep Experiment Station

By John Meyer, guest columnist
Feb 2, 2015

For the last six months, Congress and the Secretary of Agriculture have engaged in a tug of war over the continued operation of a federal facility known as the U.S. Sheep Experiment Station. Started 100 years ago, the Sheep Station is located in the Centennial Mountains of southwest Montana and grazes thousands of domestic sheep at elevations that push 10,000 feet. The facility costs taxpayers nearly \$2 million every year.

Last June, Secretary Vilsack sent a letter to Congress announcing his plans to consolidate the research at the Sheep Station with that of a larger animal research facility in Nebraska. Congress blocked the consolidation.

Moving the sheep research to Nebraska would save taxpayers millions of dollars, reduce the size of our federal government and still provide for continued sheep research. According to Secretary Vilsack, facility conditions at the Sheep Station are some of the worst within the entire Agricultural Research Service. To continue operating the facility, the government will need to spend between \$2 and \$4 million to replace corroded water lines, fix deteriorating buildings and upgrade IT infrastructure. Even if those costs were not an issue, the secretary has unequivocally stated there is not enough money to continue viable research at the Sheep Station. Consolidating the Sheep Station with the Nebraska facility makes good economic sense.

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Moving the Sheep Station would also benefit wildlife. The Centennial Mountains have a unique east-west configuration that could allow grizzly bears and other carnivores to move from Yellowstone National Park into the Bitterroots and large unoccupied wilderness areas in Idaho. The Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee, who is responsible for recovering grizzly bears, has stated that grizzly bears are unlikely to reach the Bitterroots by any other path. Every state and federal agency that has weighed in on the Sheep Station has asked the facility not to graze sheep in this important grizzly bear habitat.

The Sheep Station has downplayed the environmental impacts of its grazing operations, claiming there have been no grizzly bear/human conflicts. Internal emails obtained through Freedom of Information Act requests tell a different story: Grizzly bears have previously chased the government sheepherders and defended sheep carcasses. In the fall of 2012, the collar from a grizzly bear was found under a rock in a stream on Sheep Station property. The bear's carcass was never recovered, but its last live location was in the same area as the sheep. An empty rifle cartridge was recovered from the sheepherder's camp. The sheepherders disconnected their phones, closed their bank accounts and skipped town before they could be questioned by law enforcement.

Congress has funded the Sheep Station for 2015, but Secretary Vilsack has made it clear that the Sheep Station is a money pit and legal liability. If Congress doesn't want to save taxpayer money and protect wildlife habitat, the Department of Agriculture should do so through its upcoming Environmental Impact Statement.

John Meyer is the executive director of Cottonwood Environmental Law Center and the attorney for Gallatin Wildlife Association, Western Watersheds Project, and WildEarth Guardians in current litigation against the U.S. Sheep Experiment Station.