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Sheep industry requests research on not grazing

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS Capital Press
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The American Sheep Industry is proposing a study of the effect of not grazing sheep on rangeland.
Courtesy of Sam Cox

The American Sheep Industry Association is hoping proposed research will show the beneficial effects of grazing on range and forest health.

The organization has sent a letter to the U.S. Sheep Experiment Station at Dubois, Idaho, requesting a long-term study on the effects of taking grazing out of the equation on a portion of the station's rangeland.

The facility is operated by USDA Agricultural Research Service and has been conducting research on sheep and range management for more than 100 years.

ASI believes its proposed research would further elucidate the benefits of livestock grazing and rangelands and forests toward sustaining and improving range health and wildlife populations.

“Our contention based on centuries of animal husbandry is that the best managed lands are those that benefit from livestock grazing,” Benny Cox, ASI president, said in the letter.

ASI knows the benefits of livestock grazing such as reducing fuel loads for wildfires, controlling invasive species and improving wildlife habitat, Chase Adams, ASI senior policy and information director, told Capital Press.

The proposed research “would be tremendously valuable in putting numbers to what we already know,” he said.

Experience in the field, small-scale studies and photo monitoring of grazed and ungrazed areas have shown that grazing is good for range health and wildlife habitat. But there’s a research gap, he said.

That’s especially important as Congress and others continue the drumbeat to remove grazing from federal lands, he said.

“The Sheep Station is in a unique position with a century of grazing research to look at the impact of no management/no grazing in a long-term scientific way,” he said.

“With over a century of vegetation, climate and grazing data on these lands, there is no other facility in the world better equipped to undertake such an important long-term study,” Cox said in the letter.

ASI is proposing the study be conducted on Sheep Station’s land along the Idaho-Montana divide in the Centennial Mountains on summer ranges consisting of land in the Odell Creek, Big Mountain and Tom Creek areas — about 17,000 acres.

The Sheep Station hasn’t grazed those areas for the past few years due to litigation brought by Cottonwood Legal Foundation requiring the station to prepare and environmental impact statement, Chase said.

The issue involved the impact of grazing on grizzly bears.

That EIS has been prepared, but ASI is asking the station to not turn out and do the study instead, he said.

“It’s a good opportunity to undertake some research we need to remain competitive,” he said.

ASI envisions a 10- to 14-year study and doesn’t believe it will require any additional funding. But it might require cooperation with land-grant universities that already partner with the sheep station, he said.

“We believe that at the end of the requested study, the data will support the necessity of livestock grazing to sustain and improve rangeland and forest health and diversity,” Cox said.

However, should the data indicate otherwise, ASI would support a land-management research agenda based on the study results, he said.

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