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Montana Fish,
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Montana Fish & Wildlife Commission

February 11, 2016

Honorable Jon Tester
United States Senate
311 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510-2604

RE: US Sheep Experiment Station and Its Impacts Upon Hunting and Wildlife in MT

Dear Senator Tester:

We are writing as Montana's Fish and Wildlife Commission to bring your attention to impending changes related to the U.S. Sheep Experiment Station (Sheep Station) based in Dubois, Idaho, which have potentially significant positive implications for hunters, wildlife, and recreationists in southwestern Montana. We respectfully ask for your active participation in congressional deliberations regarding the future management of the Sheep Station.

Background

The Sheep Station is a research facility established in 1915 and operated by the Agricultural Research Service (ARS), a division of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). The Sheep Station headquarters and most of the 48,000 acres dedicated to this facility are in Idaho, but the Sheep Station also controls 16,000 acres of high-elevation federal lands in Montana—lands which are officially closed to hunting, outdoor recreation and other public, multiple uses. The domestic sheep which graze on these high-elevation lands are not private sheep owned by a private ranching family. They are government-owned domestic sheep owned by the state of Idaho, and are there primarily for pasturage, not research. We are asking for your assistance in requesting the State of Idaho to remove their sheep from the high elevation pastures and to return these 16,000 acres to multiple use management which allows for hunting, hiking, and other multiple uses authorized by the forest plan. We are not asking for the closure of the sheep station.

Citing agency budget constraints, staffing and aging-infrastructure issues at the Sheep Station, the Secretary of Agriculture in 2014 proposed closing the Sheep Station and moving its personnel and research to some of the 15 other ARS facilities in the country that engage in sheep research. Although ARS has stated it can maintain or improve sheep research by concentrating the work at other research facilities, members of Idaho's congressional delegation have intervened – in part because the Sheep Station's 14 federal jobs are a valued component of the Clark County, Idaho, economy. Idaho's congressional delegation has maintained funding for the Sheep Station through Fiscal Year 2016, but USDA continues to advance its proposal to close the facility.

The fate of the Sheep Station has an economic component for eastern Idaho. The issues are different for Montanans. Montana woolgrowers, this Commission, and Montanans have a stake in ensuring continued federal research designed to improve sheep husbandry. The benefits of that research presumably flow from the research quality and quantity, and the USDA does not have to close the Sheep Station to resolve the Montana

conflicts. The Centennial pastures are used merely as a source of forage for **government-owned domestic sheep**, not as a focus of research. By obtaining alternative forage, elsewhere in Idaho, the Sheep Station could fulfill its research mission and return this land to multiple-use management that includes hunter and recreation access, and management for wildlife and wildlife habitat.

In addition to issues regarding hunter and public access and use of these lands, Montanans have made significant commitments and sacrifices to restore and conserve grizzly bears and other wildlife in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem and Southwestern Montana. The Sheep Station's grazing activities, with its government-owned domestic sheep, in the Centennial Mountains creates significant management challenges for the conservation commitments Montanans have made and continue to make.

Living and working around wildlife inevitably involves tradeoffs and balancing of interests. **This Commission does not oppose grazing by private, cattle and sheep ranchers on public lands. However, the government owned, domestic sheep which currently prevent Montanans from recreating on the 16,000 acres in the Centennials are not part of a private, ranching business. They are owned by the State of Idaho and the operation of the research station does not depend on their continued grazing of these lands.**

We urge your attention and constructive participation in resolving the Sheep Station's wildlife conflicts in the Centennial Mountains of Montana and in restoring multiple use public access to the federal lands now closed to Montanans by the State of Idaho's domestic sheep.

Sincerely,



Dan Vermillion, Chairman

Richard Kerstein, Commissioner



Matt Tourtlotte, Commissioner



Gary Wolfe, Commissioner