

To Jay Gore

JUL 13 1979

on letterhead of The Wildlife Society, Idaho Chapter

Honorable Frank Church
Room 245
Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C., 20510

Dear Senator Church,

This responds to the July 6th request from Mr. Fred Hutchinson of your staff concerning the wildlife values in Big Deer Creek basin, Lemhi County, Idaho, as they relate to the Blackbird Mine. These comments are based on the attached narrative from two Idaho Society members and on conversations with other Society members. The authors of the narrative make their comments as Society members and not as employees of their respective agencies.

The wildlife population in Big Deer Creek is not well known. This is especially true of bighorn sheep. We know of no data showing that bighorns now use Big Deer Creek basin. However, south-facing slopes of the watershed do contain bighorn habitat. The basin provides a potential expansion area for the large and vigorous bighorn herd in the Clear Creek Basin. We suspect that Clear Creek bighorns living near Gant Ridge occasionally drift onto the Big Deer Creek side of the ridge. The portion of Big Deer Creek watershed upstream of the confluence of Indian Creek and South Fork of Big Deer Creek contains good summer habitat for elk and mule deer. This is especially true on the north side of that part of the watershed. A few elk and mule deer winter near the mouth of Big Deer Creek.

The east-facing slope of Panther Creek between the mouth of Big Deer Creek and Clear Creek winters up to 75 elk and 40 bighorns. A lesser number of mule deer winter there. The wintering elk and bighorns occur primarily on the Clear Creek end of this slope. The entire slope contains scattered bighorn habitat, which is now generally unoccupied by bighorns. However, bighorn rams are known to occasionally use this east-facing slope throughout its length. The east-facing slope provides an area for future expansion of the Clear Creek bighorn herd. Placement of this

slope within the RNRW would prevent future prescribed burning for habitat improvement.

The land in the vicinity of the Bacon Ranch and Clear Creek Ranch, near the mouth of Clear Creek, is an important wintering area for bighorns. If the ranches and their immediately adjacent areas are designated part of the RNRW, public agencies will not be able to manipulate the habitat there for bighorns. Also, the trapping of bighorns from this population for transplant elsewhere would be extremely complicated. Therefore, we recommend that these two ranches and their immediately adjacent areas be excluded from wilderness.

Mr. Hutchinson also asked how much natural resource development the bighorns can tolerate in the vicinity of Gant Ridge and Big Deer Creek. This is impossible to answer in a general statement, since individual animals vary in their tolerance to man. For example, many bighorns readily flee from people, but some become habituated to considerable human disturbance. In the Panther Creek area a few bighorns have learned to tolerate the noise and sight of logging trucks. Because of this variability, we recommend that you lean toward preventing human disturbance, rather than encouraging it.

The major immediate development threat to bighorns in the Panther Creek watershed is the almost certain increase in poaching of the animals by mineworkers and their families. Historically, miners have seriously reduced bighorn populations wherever the two have occurred in close proximity. The improved road access due to mining would also increase bighorn poaching by loggers and other forest users. If the mine expansion occurs, we know of no practicable way to prevent such wildlife losses.

We have just learned that cobalt mining interests are staking mineral claims to extensive areas north of Gant Ridge, including Clear Creek basin. That basin is vital to the Panther Creek watershed big game herds. Mining activity in the Clear Creek area would be extremely detrimental to big game. We categorically oppose mining in Clear Creek basin.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide these views. Our north Idaho Chapter members will respond to Mr. Hutchinson's request for information on the Jersey-Jack area.

Sincerely yours,

James A. Nee
Secretary-Treasurer

Attachment

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