



P. O. Box 8320
Denver, Colorado 80201
bighornsheep.org
720-201-3791

September 12, 2010

BLM Royal Gorge Field Office
Over the River Comments
3028 Main Street
Canon City, Co 81212

To whom it may Concern,

The Rocky Mountain Bighorn Society, (RMBS), with approximately 900 members, is dedicated to the enhancement of bighorn sheep (BHS) and mountain goat herds and habitat throughout the Rocky Mountains, most specifically in Colorado and Wyoming. In cooperation with the Colorado Division of Wildlife, U. S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management and other federal, state and local agencies, the RMBS achieves these goals through fund raising, volunteer efforts and education. These partnerships annually contribute between \$150,000 to \$200,000 to bighorn sheep and mountain goat management and habitat.

The "Over the River" project has the potential to impact hundreds of Colorado Bighorn Sheep through the increased traffic, construction, and installation of panels over some six miles of the Arkansas River bighorn sheep habitat. Sheep are a stress sensitive species and are susceptible to large die-offs when conditions are not favorable or experience significant change. The RMBS has assisted with the improvement of herds and habitat in Bighorn Canyon for many years, both through monetary project donations and volunteer work projects. Colorado's mountains and rivers are under constant bombardment by society and its seemingly incessant need to develop, profit from, and over-populate natural areas that are critical to the wildlife that abounds in these areas. The RMBS continues to ask that the Over the River Project not be approved for construction, as this is obviously the best way to protect our Colorado State Animal and other species.

On July 29, 2009 the United States Forest Service listed Bighorn Sheep as a Sensitive Species on all Region 4 forests with one of the factors being, "Greatest threats to BHS include habitat degradation, human disturbance, and disease distribution from domestic sheep and goats". The Bureau of Land Management has not listed BHS as a sensitive species. However, BLM lands are interspersed with USFS lands throughout the west and this designation cannot be ignored. The USFS memo is attached for your review.

We have carefully reviewed the draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) and offer the following specific comments:

Chapter 1.0 Introduction

Page 1-14 The mission of the Colorado Division of Wildlife is to "perpetuate the wildlife resources of the state and provide the people the opportunity to enjoy them".

The RMBS believes that the OTR project is in conflict with this mission statement.

Page 1-17 1.6.2 Specific Conformance Review Findings

This section states that the project is potentially in conflict with the ESR-1 Specific Decisions, especially sections 1-16 and 1-30. Section 1-30 specifically states that special status animal species habitat will be protected through elimination of conflicting uses.

The RMBS believes that the OTR project is a conflicting use and is not in compliance with resource management objectives.

Page 1-18 1.7 Relationship to non-BLM Policies, Plans and Programs

The RMBS believes that the OTR project is not in compliance with the *2001 Arkansas River Recreation Management Plan*, as it does not emphasize the area's natural resources, but rather injects another man-made impact that is detrimental to BHS habitat and the well-being of all canyon inhabitants.

Chapter 3 Affected Environment

Page 3.3 3.1.1.1a Bighorn Sheep

The RMBS is in substantial agreement with the general overview of BHS in the study area. We do note that significant numbers of BHS are present at a number of the proposed panel areas, and we believe these sections should be eliminated to remove stress to BHS. The BLM and the CDOW have both expressed concern with BHS impacts, especially on the North side of the Arkansas River, and we certainly share that concern about project impacts. Alternative 4 is the only alternative that would significantly reduce these impacts.

Page 3-196 Arkansas Headwaters Recreation Area

As stated in the 2001 AHRA Management Plan, the vision statement is:

(Underline added)

The Arkansas Headwaters Recreation Area shall be managed to emphasize its natural resources, resource sustainability, and the standards for public land health, recognizing and respecting private property, while embracing numerous recreational, educational, and commercial activities. Such management will require balancing the many uses that preserve the existing natural settings and conditions as well as recognizing existing

agriculture, rural, and urban conditions throughout the river corridor. Maintaining these expectations and settings for visitors and residents alike will require individualized management through different sections of the river, in recognition of varying natural and manmade influences. Where conflict over goals and objectives occurs, balance and compromise should be found that recognizes the value of authorized recreational activities without diminishing the standards for public land health or the water resources (AHRA 2001a).

The RMBS believes that the OTR project, as presented, does not comply with this vision statement or the earlier mentioned management plan, and that if the project is to go forward, significant compromise to meet these visions and standards must be met.

Chapter 4 Environmental Consequences

Page 4-3 Table 4-1 Summary of Terrestrial Species Impacts by Alternative

Species impacts for BHS range from significant to minor with alternatives 1-4 being most serious. The discussion on this page indicates that there is a need for continuing efforts to explore mitigation efforts and develop an effective monitoring plan. The RMBS agrees that mitigation may be possible but would by its nature have to be done on a large and comprehensive scale to reduce impacts below moderate and significant. Although we certainly believe in the necessity of monitoring plans for any BHS herd, this offer would simply document the significant negative impacts as the canyon is altered for significant periods of time.

Page 4-259 Hunting

The RMBS agrees with the CDOW that BHS hunting will essentially not be possible during the time of OTR. A BHS hunting license is almost a once in a lifetime event and should not be limited for the sake of one person's vision of a major canyon project like OTR.

Page 4-272 Hunting, Alternative 1d

Again, the RMBS agrees with the CDOW that hunting of big game species would be impacted in many ways under the proposed Alternative 1d. Access to our public lands will be severely restricted and the potential conflicts between project viewers and hunters and anglers are very real. Highway 50 through the canyon is a major access route for a large portion of Colorado's hunting country. Hunters typically tow horse trailers, campers and other equipment which may create major conflicts with traffic requirements during accelerated construction and exhibition dates.

Page 4-276 Hunting, Alternative 2

See comments on Alternative 1d.

Chapter 5 Mitigation and Monitoring

Page 5.1 Terrestrial Wildlife and Habitat

Wildlife 1-5 Paragraphs 1-5 are mitigation concessions that should be occurring without the OTR project and in fact, some already do occur. The RMBS considers these proposals to be of no significance to the overall project impacts.

Wildlife-6 The BHS herds in the project area are significantly impacted by loss of forage and increased predator impacts due to the decadent, over-mature, piñon-juniper forest in the canyon. These herds have experienced population reductions in some areas due to these factors, and the need for a large scale habitat enhancement project has never been greater. Proposed mitigation measures should be defined and presented for public review and comment before a permit is granted for any alternative presented in the EIS. Mitigation measures should also apply to Alternative 4 if this is selected as the preferred alternative.

Wildlife-8 Monitoring during construction and display is certainly necessary but is offered as a mitigation that will have little or no effect on impacts once the project begins. Political pressure and momentum would never stop, or even slow down the OTR project if monitoring indicated significant impacts on BHS and other species of all types. Mitigation measures should also apply to Alternative 4. The fact that the applicant has not offered mitigation for Wildlife 6 and 8 indicates a certain lack of real commitment to BHS in the total project area.

Summary

The Rocky Mountain Bighorn Society cannot and does not support the Over the River Project. Bighorn Sheep and other species of any type cannot possibly benefit from this type of project. As often happens, the impacts of the past five years of planning and the years of construction to come are all to satisfy the vision of one party, while others are forced to move aside. Conservation, including the protection and preservation of public lands, land species, fisheries, plants and avian species, is set aside while this vision is fulfilled. At some point we all must say “it's not the money, the art and the satisfying of mans insatiable personal need; the environment is more important.”

Despite this plea, if the OTR is permitted to advance in some form, the BLM and others must demand that real habitat and social mitigation be explicitly defined and agreed upon before any Alternative is approved.

The RMBS asks that we be informed of any further actions on the part of the BLM and OTR so that we may comment further if necessary.

We do appreciate the process and thank the BLM for the opportunity to comment.

Sincerely,

Daniel J. Larkin

daniel_larkin@msn.com

Past RMBS President

Government Liaison