BIGHORN RETURNED TO NORTHERN SANGRE DE CRISTO RANGE

CRESTONE, Colo. - Thirteen Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep have a new home in the northern portion of the Sangre de Cristo mountain range following a successful transplant operation by the Colorado Division of Wildlife.

The Northern Sangres have been devoid of bighorn sheep since the 1980's, but with the population in the Southern Sangres thriving, the DOW decided to take advantage of an opportunity to reestablish Colorado's state animal to another part of its historic range.

"Bighorn belong in the Northern Sangres," said Dan Prenzlow, DOW Southeast Regional Manager. "Restoring native species is the kind of thing the Division of Wildlife loves to do. We're delighted to be able to make this happen."

The project, led by Brian Dreher, the senior terrestrial biologist for the Southeast Region, presented a novel challenge.

"This is the first time we've moved sheep from one high alpine location to another," Dreher said. "We hope these first 13 animals are the beginning of new self-sustaining alpine herd sheep in good habitat were bighorn were once common."

During a two-day operation in mid-October, Colorado-based Quicksilver Air, Inc. captured three rams, nine ewes and a lamb at elevations between 12,000 and 13,000 feet above sea level in the mountains southeast of Crestone. The bighorns were airlifted to a central processing station on the valley floor where DOW veterinarians took DNA and blood samples, gave each animal a thorough medical exam and recorded data. The sheep were also fitted with radio telemetry tracking collars and ear tags.

Once the animals were processed, DOW crews used trailers to truck the sheep to the upper end of the San Luis Valley. From that point, the helicopter airlifted the sheep again to their new alpine home north of Hunts Lake.

Prior to undertaking the project, Dreher did extensive research on habitat suitability and looked for historical accounts of bighorn sheep on the alpine areas of the Northern Sangre de Cristo range. His research indicated that bighorns were once common, but that over time sheep numbers dwindled.

The last sighting of bighorns in the Northern Sangres was in 1980.

"In the early 1900's, local ranchers reported sheep in the Northern Sangres around Stout and Bushnell lakes," he said. "Locals even called one of the peaks Sheep Mountain. When we looked, we found no sheep but plenty of good habitat, including winter range, lambing areas and escape terrain."

Dreher added that the bighorns will be monitored monthly from fixed-wing aircraft for several years to evaluate survival, reproduction, and distribution.

More information about bighorn sheep and the DOW's bighorn conservation program can be found at:

http://wildlife.state.co.us/WildlifeSpecies/Profiles/Mammals/BighornSheep.

NOTE TO NEWS EDITORS: Still photos are available for download:

Photo # 1: Helicopter delivers bighorn sheep. http://dnr.state.co.us/ImageDBImages/26036.JPG

Photo # 2: DOW biologists carry sheep from helicopter. http://dnr.state.co.us/ImageDBImages/26038.JPG

Photo # 3: Dr. Mike Miller collects DNA blood samples from bighorn sheep.

http://dnr.state.co.us/ImageDBImages/26041.JPG

Photo #4: DOW biologists fit bighorn sheep with a radio tracking collar. http://dnr.state.co.us/ImageDBImages/26040.JPG

Photo #5: Bighorn sheep with radio tracking collar. http://dnr.state.co.us/ImageDBImages/26037.JPG

For more information about Division of Wildlife go to: http://wildlife.state.co.us.