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# News Release



**For Immediate Release**

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## **CRITICAL HABITAT PROPOSED FOR SIERRA NEVADA BIGHORN SHEEP**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, today, published a proposed rule to designate approximately 417,577 acres as critical habitat under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) for the federally endangered Sierra Nevada bighorn sheep (*Ovis canadensis californiana*). Areas proposed include portions of Tuolumne, Mono, Fresno, Inyo and Tulare counties in California.

The acreage includes open upland, montane, and alpine habitats with rocky areas along the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada Mountains from about 4,000 feet to approximately 14,500 feet. Of the proposed critical habitat, 416,407 acres, occurs on federally managed lands with the remaining 1,005 acres, under private ownership and 165 acres managed by local government.

“Public comments in general, and particularly technical comments from local, state and federal agencies, will be very useful in focusing the final designation of critical habitat to those areas most essential for conservation of the species,” said Bob Williams, Field Supervisor for the Nevada Fish and Wildlife Office.

The Sierra Nevada bighorn sheep is a large mammal in the family Bovidae. They have smooth coats consisting of guard hairs and dense fleece varying from dark brown to grayish to pale tan depending on the region. The belly, rump patch, back of legs, muzzle, and eye patch are all white. The brown horns are found in both sexes, but are much larger in males.

Most of the sheep live at higher elevations in the subalpine and alpine areas during the summer. To avoid deep snow and to find forage during winter, the sheep occupy high elevation windswept ridges or migrate to lower elevation sagebrush-steppe habitats. Bighorn sheep are primarily grazers consuming various plants such as needlegrasses, currant, sagebrush, bitterbrush, buckwheats, and sedges depending on season and location.

Public comments on the proposed rule will be accepted until September 24, 2007. Written comments on the proposal should be submitted to the Field Supervisor, Nevada Fish and Wildlife Office, 1340 Financial Blvd., Suite 234, Reno, NV 89502, by email to [snbighorn@fws.gov](mailto:snbighorn@fws.gov), or by facsimile to (775) 861-6301. Written requests for a public hearing will be accepted until September 10, 2007.

Critical habitat is a term in the Endangered Species Act (Act). It identifies geographic areas that contain features essential for the conservation of a threatened or endangered species and may require special management considerations or protection. The designation of critical habitat does not affect land ownership or establish a refuge, wilderness, reserve, preserve, or other conservation area. It does not allow government or public access to private lands. Federal agencies that undertake, fund or permit activities that may affect critical habitat are required to consult with the Service to ensure such actions do not adversely modify or destroy designated critical habitat.

Habitat is also protected through cooperative measures under the ESA, including Habitat Conservation Plans, Safe Harbor Agreements, Candidate Conservation Agreements and state programs. In addition, voluntary partnership programs such as the Service's Private Stewardship Grants and the Partners for Fish and Wildlife program also restore habitat. Habitat for listed species is provided on many of the Service's National Wildlife Refuges, and state wildlife management areas.

The species essential habitat (primary constituent elements) includes the following:

- (1) Non-forested habitats or forest openings within the Sierra Nevada from 4,000 ft (1,219 m) to 14,500 ft (4,420 m) in elevation with steep (greater than or equal to 60 percent slope), rocky slopes that provide for foraging, mating, lambing, predator avoidance, and bedding and allow for seasonal elevational movements between these areas.
- (2) Presence of a variety of forage plants as indicated by the presence of grasses (e.g., Achnanthera spp.; Elymus spp.) and browse (e.g., Ribes spp.; Artemisia spp., Purshia spp.) in winter, and grasses, browse, sedges (e.g., Carex spp.) and forbs (e.g., Eriogonum spp.) in summer.
- (3) Presence of granite rock outcroppings containing minerals such as sodium, calcium, iron, and phosphorus that could be used as salt licks/mineral licks in order to meet nutritional needs.

This proposed rule was prepared pursuant to a court order resulting from a lawsuit filed against the Service by the Center for Biological Diversity.

A copy of the proposed rule and other information about Sierra Nevada bighorn sheep is available on the Internet at <http://www.fws.gov/nevada> or by contacting Bob Williams, (775) 861-6300.

The Service is preparing a draft economic analysis of the proposed critical habitat that will be released for public review and comment at a later date.

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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 97-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 547 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resources offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the

Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign and Native American tribal governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.