

# Agreement ends sheep grazing in area rife with wolves, bears

**By MIKE STARK  
Of The Gazette Staff**

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Domestic sheep don't mix well with grizzly bears and wolves. Now they won't mix at all on more than 70,000 acres in the Absaroka-Beartooth wilderness.

A 74,000-acre sheep grazing allotment south of Big Timber in the Gallatin National Forest has been permanently closed, and the ranchers who used it for generations have been paid to move their sheep elsewhere, according to a deal expected to be announced today.

The agreement is the eighth -- and second-largest -- in the greater Yellowstone ecosystem in recent years that has led to the retirement of about 300,000 acres from grazing.

"Ultimately, this is going to be one of the most effective solutions we have to deal with chronic conflicts between wildlife and livestock," said Hank Fischer of the National Wildlife Federation, one of the groups that helped organize the deals.

The latest involves the Ash Mountain and Iron Mountain allotments used for generations by the Allestad family of Big Timber. The land is adjacent to the north boundary of Yellowstone National Park in an area frequented by grizzlies, wolves, bighorn sheep, elk and other wild animals.

Between 1999 and 2003, bears and wolves killed more than 100 sheep on the allotment.

According to the agreement, the National Wildlife Federation will pay the ranchers \$130,000, and the Allestads then waive their grazing privileges back to the Gallatin National Forest. Forest officials have agreed to permanently close the allotment.

The decision wasn't an easy one.

Elaine Allestad said the family had been grazing sheep in that area since the late 1920s. In recent years, the family had been permitted to have a maximum of 1,200 sheep on the allotment.

But wolves and grizzlies took a heavy toll on their ewes and lambs. A few years ago, grizzlies killed 60 sheep, she said.

While it made sense to take their sheep somewhere farther from wild carnivores, it was difficult to say goodbye to a tradition several generations old of raising sheep in the backcountry.

"It was a very sad decision to make because of the history," she said.

But the decision will pay dividends to the wildlife in the area, said Chris Smith, chief of staff for Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks.

Not only does the deal cut down on conflicts between sheep and the big predators, it also reduces the risk that domestic sheep might pass diseases to bighorn sheep, Smith said.

"All the way around it's a very positive development," Smith said.

Conflicts between livestock and carnivores can be thorny for everyone involved. Ranchers lose animals and money, and as a result wolves and grizzlies that cause problems often are killed by wildlife managers.

Chris Servheen, grizzly recovery coordinator for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, said the sheep allotment was adjacent to some of Yellowstone's highest-density bear populations.

There's a lot of talk and controversy surrounding grizzly bears and the latest proposal to remove them from the endangered species list, but there are too few projects like the Ash Mountain/Iron Mountain deal that open up grizzly habitat and pay immediate dividends for wildlife, he said.

"That's the kind of applied positive conservation that really makes a difference for grizzly bears," Servheen said. "It's a feather in their cap, and I take my hat off to them."

The deal also could provide more room for wolves, including the Slough Creek pack, one of the most-watched packs in Yellowstone National Park lately.

Fischer said his group isn't intent on shutting down grazing operations on public lands or putting any ranchers out of business. So far, every rancher involved in the deals has used the incentive payment to find a new area to graze livestock.

"We aren't getting rid of grazing; we're redistributing where it occurs -- away from core wildlife areas near national parks and wilderness areas and closer to low-conflict areas," Fischer said.

The latest allotment retirement ends an era for sheep grazing in that area.

"The history of sheep grazing in the Absaroka Mountains is a storied one that will be missed by many but not forgotten," Ken Britton, district ranger for the Gallatin National Forest, wrote in a letter to the Allestads. "The Allestad name will always be tied to those memories."

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