



**NATIONAL WILDLIFE FEDERATION®**

Northern Rockies Natural Resource Center

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## P R E S S   R E L E A S E

# **Forest Service Closes High-Conflict Sheep Allotment Near Yellowstone Park**

Missoula, MT – March 16, 2006 – Hank Fischer – 406-549-0761

The National Wildlife Federation and a broad coalition of conservation partners recently finalized an agreement with a prominent Montana ranching family that resulted in Forest Service closure of the 74,000-acre Ash Mountain/Iron Mountain sheep grazing allotment immediately adjacent to Yellowstone National Park. The allotment lies in the Gallatin National Forest and is completely within the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness.

Between 1999 and 2003, government officials verified more than a hundred conflicts between domestic sheep and grizzly bears and wolves on the allotment, which lies immediately adjacent to Yellowstone Park's highest density wolf and bear populations. The area also contains substantial elk and bighorn sheep populations.

Hank Fischer of the National Wildlife Federation worked closely with ranchers Lawrence and Elaine Allestad to resolve the conflict. According to Fischer, "The high concentration of grizzlies and wolves in this area made sheep production a serious challenge. We devised a pragmatic solution that honored the needs of wildlife while respecting the legitimate economic concerns of the producer."

According to Elaine Allestad of Big Timber, "We agreed to the retirement because we could not afford to take the losses of so many ewes and lambs to grizzlies and wolves. It is hard to express our feelings about a lifetime and several generations of loving to raise sheep in the backcountry. It will be a history and tradition for our community that is gone forever. We owned the last of thirty-some bands of sheep that once grazed in the wilderness."

The agreement has three parts. First, the National Wildlife Federation supplied the Allestads with an incentive payment to voluntarily waive their grazing permit, which they used to secure new grazing in an area without grizzlies or wolves. Second, the Allestads waived their grazing privileges back to the Gallatin National Forest. Third, District Ranger Ken Britton permanently closed the allotment, consistent with the existing Forest Plan.

According to Forest Supervisor Becki Heath, “The Forest appreciates and supports the groups and individuals involved with this agreement. Having the opportunity to close this allotment will greatly enhance the quality of grizzly bear and wolf habitat in the area and positively address a difficult management situation.”

While grizzly bears and wolves were a focal point of this retirement, the allotment also provides important habitat for bighorn sheep, elk and moose. The area is well known for its excellent big game hunting in a wilderness setting.

Support for this retirement came from a diverse group of conservation interests, including the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, the Montana Chapter of the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep, the Turner Foundation, the Arthur B. Schultz Foundation, The Alex P. Walker Foundation, Jennifer Speers, The Vital Ground Foundation, Sierra Club, the Tapeats Fund, the Sperling Foundation, and Defenders of Wildlife.

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