

# Campaign fights bacteria that's killing bighorn lambs

Illness continues to threaten future of Baker County's two bighorn herds

By JAYSON JACOBY  
Baker City Herald.

BAKER CITY — As the helicopter flew over the ridges and canyons of eastern Baker County recently, Brian Ratliff was seeing more bighorn sheep than he expected.

But the news wasn't exclusively of the good variety.

It was the sheep Ratliff didn't see during the flight over the Lookout Mountain unit — lambs — that define the continuing threat to the future of Oregon's biggest herd of Rocky Mountain bighorns.

Ratliff, the district wildlife biologist at the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife's Baker City office, counted just four lambs during the aerial census.

All of those lambs, born in 2021, were in small groups of sheep in the northern part of the unit, which is bordered on the north by state Highway 86 and on the south by Interstate 84.

The scarcity of lambs shows that a bacterial infection remains widespread in the Lookout Mountain unit and puts the long-term health of the herd in peril.

ODFW biologists believe all of the 65 to 70 lambs born in the unit in spring 2020 died due to the same strain of *Mycoplasma ovipneumoniae* bacteria.

It was first detected in the Lookout Mountain herd, which included about 400 bighorns, in February 2020 when dead sheep were found near the Snake River Road above Brownlee Reservoir.

Lab tests of tissue samples from dead sheep confirmed the strain of bacteria, the first time it had been found in bighorn sheep in Oregon.

## Half a herd

During an aerial count in late 2018, biologists counted 403 bighorns in the Lookout Mountain unit. A survey in late 2020 showed about 250 sheep.

Ratliff said he expected about 225 in this year's count, so he was somewhat pleased by the total of 274 animals. About 62% of the bighorns, however, were distributed among several large groups in one canyon in the south



A group of bighorn sheep, including a lamb, in the Lookout Mountain unit in eastern Baker County on June 20, 2020.

## COSTLY CAMPAIGN

Trapping, testing and attaching GPS collars to bighorn sheep in some of Baker County's most rugged country is a time-consuming, and expensive, endeavor.

Brian Ratliff, wildlife biologist at the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife's Baker City office, said the agency has benefited from financial assistance from the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, as well as technical assistance from the tribes' biologists. The tribes have contributed \$32,000 of their own funds, and also received a federal grant for \$183,000.

Ratliff said the Oregon chapter of the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep contributed \$10,000, and the foundation's national office allocated \$50,000 for a three-state bighorn sheep project that includes Washington and Idaho. The Bureau of Land Management, which oversees much of the land that both the Lookout Mountain and Burnt River Canyon bighorn herds use, recently contributed \$20,000. And ODFW has spent more than \$125,000 so far on the campaign, Ratliff said.

part of the unit. Ratliff didn't see any lambs in that area.

He said that's strong evidence the bacteria, which sheep can easily spread among themselves, is still present in those larger groups and likely killed all of this year's lambs.

"In the smaller subgroups there's less chance of lambs being infected," Ratliff said.

Biologists were initially optimistic in 2020, with no dead lambs found as of mid-June. They knew, from earlier testing, that lambs aren't infected by their

mothers prior to birth.

But later in summer 2020, as ewes and lambs started to congregate in larger "nursery" groups, lambs started to sicken and die.

## Finding the 'shedders'

The key to saving the Lookout Mountain herd — and the smaller herd of California bighorns, a smaller subspecies, in the Burnt River Canyon south of I-84 — is finding the sheep that are chronic "shedders" of the bacteria that causes potentially fatal pneumonia,



A group of bighorn rams photographed on June 20, 2020, in the Lookout Mountain unit in eastern Baker County.

Ratliff said.

That's the focus of a multi-agency effort that started in 2020 and likely will continue for several years.

This campaign relies heavily on temporarily capturing bighorns, testing them for the bacteria, and fitting them with GPS tracking collars.

Chronic shedders often don't get sick, but they can quickly spread the bacteria to other sheep that lack high levels of immunity, Ratliff said.

Ewes that are chronic shedders are especially problematic because they mingle

with other ewes, and lambs, more often than rams, which are either solitary or with other rams much of the year.

Lambs are especially vulnerable, as the nearly wholesale loss of the youngest animals the past two years attests.

Last fall, ODFW, with financial aid from the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, as well as the Oregon and national chapters of the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep, captured 25 bighorns from the Lookout Mountain herd. Although all 25 of those sheep had anti-

bodies in their blood showing they had been infected with the bacteria, just four of the 25 were shedding bacteria at that time, Ratliff said.

Biologists fitted all those sheep with tracking collars so they can be captured again and retested.

## 'We've just got to figure out who it is'

So far this fall, ODFW has captured, tested and collared 14 more sheep from Lookout Mountain.

None was a chronic shedder, Ratliff said, although test results from two of the bighorns were inconclusive, so it's not clear whether they are shedders or not. One of the 14, a ewe, was a chronic shedder identified in 2020, but was not shedding this fall.

Sheep that are trapped twice and are chronically shedding both times will be euthanized, Ratliff said.

So far, ODFW hasn't euthanized any bighorns from Lookout Mountain since none has twice been identified as a chronic shedder.

Ratliff said it's possible the herd could recover from the outbreak by virtue of the chronic shedders dying naturally. Over time, more sheep are likely to gain immunity from a previous exposure to the bacteria, as well.

On the other hand, just a few chronic shedders could potentially keep the bacteria circulating within the herd, and decimating each year's crop of lambs.

"We've just got to figure out who it is," Ratliff said.

To maintain the herd population requires a minimum of 20 lambs per 100 ewes, he said.

The average ratio for the Lookout Mountain herd is 38 lambs per 100 ewes, and the number has ranged from a high of 67 per 100 to a low of 24.

Ratliff said he expects to see a typical crop of lambs born in the Lookout Mountain herd late in the coming spring.

During the aerial survey this month, he said he didn't see any evidence of sick sheep — bighorns that develop pneumonia from the bacteria typically cough and stumble. And based on 2020 and 2021, it doesn't appear the bacteria is affecting the reproductive capacity of the herd.

Ratliff said biologists don't know how the Lookout Mountain herd was initially infected with the bacteria.



Blue Mountain Community College's McKeeley Tonkin (00) drives the ball up the court against the Edmonds Tridents on Nov. 19, 2021, the first day of the Red Lion Classic at Blue Mountain Community College in Pendleton. BMCC and the rest of the Northwest Athletic Conference is pausing winter sports until the week of Jan. 17, 2022.

## NWAC:

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The NWAC cited several reasons for the delay, including that positive COVID-19 numbers in December 2021 hammered college and professional sports scheduling and based on previous history and future indications, January looks concerning before a drop in February and March.

In light of the new variant,

it will give the Sports Medicine Advisory Committee time to review and adjust safety protocols for basketball, and all involved in basketball, to be as safe as possible. Any updates on safety protocols will be posted as soon as they become available.

The decision gives NWAC student-athletes returning from the holiday break more time to get tested, follow through on safety protocols, and if needed, isolate and quarantine.

Also, with almost all NWAC scheduled games canceled prior to Christmas and the week before New Year's Day, it allows student-athletes the opportunity to get back into playing condition.

Regional games canceled because a team has COVID-19 will result in a forfeit, loss for that team, and a win for the team that was able to compete.

By delaying the season it may help eliminate or reduce the number league games

canceled because of COVID-19 issues.

The NWAC stated it has learned from the past two years, and will respond and continue to do so as necessary. The NWAC fully understands that by making this adjustment it is not fool proof and that issues may pop up. One answer does not fit all.

According to the BMCC website, the Timberwolves will be back in action Jan. 17, hosting North Idaho. The women will play at 2 p.m., with the men at 4 p.m.

## Garton:

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During the coronavirus pandemic, her 2020 summer ball season was canceled, and come winter, the indoor facilities were closed.

"It was kind of hard with COVID and everything got canceled," Garton said. "In the winter, I was having to pitch outside in the snow. I was on the freshman football field looking down at a perfectly good facility. I was having pitching lessons and it was 20 degrees outside."

It didn't take long for the Gartons to decide to turn their old barn into a softball practice facility.

"We put in a batting cage, put down turf and my pitching rubber, insulated it and put in lights," Garton said. "That barn is so special to me. I was out there every day. I have my friends out. We have a TV and couches, and my dad (Kelsy) just put a fireplace in there. We did it all ourselves. I will remember it for the rest of my life."

The fact that Garton was able to keep her skills sharp helped when coaches were finally able to get their eyes on players.

"It was really hard to get recruited," Garton said. "I have hitting and pitching lessons every Monday, and my dad catches for me. The barn was such a big part of my recruiting. It was truly awesome that my family was able to do that."

Garton, who also plays volleyball, gets her love of sports from her parents Kelsy and Kristan. They both played at Pendleton High School. Kristan went on to play volleyball and softball at Blue Mountain Community College, while Kelsy played baseball at BMCC.

"They were high school sweethearts," said Garton, who earned second-team IMC honors for volleyball. "My mom was a pitcher, and my dad played third base and was a really good hitter. I absolutely love volleyball, maybe because my dad doesn't know much about it. We butt heads, but there's a lot of love."

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