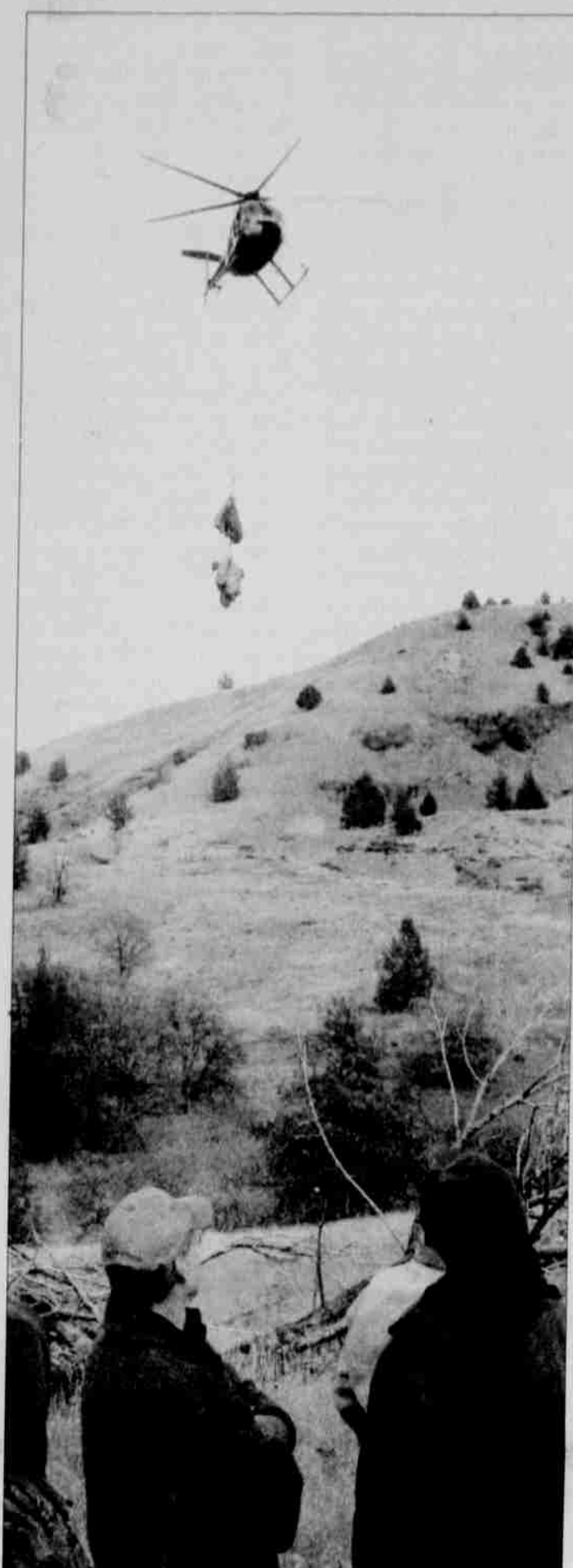


Bighorns: Helicopter flies sheep into roadless area



Spilyay photo / Brian Mortensen
Members of the ground crew at Eagle Creek Canyon watch as a helicopter piloted by Jim Pope Jr., of Clarkston, Wash., flies in a group of five sheep from the Lower John Day area Saturday afternoon.

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"But we're going to try to expand their range a little bit, so they'll mix with those other sheep."

The sheep populations have proven resilient where they have been introduced, and if especially lush forage is available, they flourish, as the herds in the John Day and Deschutes river canyons have, Klus said.

"With the Warm Springs sheep, they'll go right into that release we put in a couple years ago, so it's kind of a supplement more than new release, so 15 is a good number since they're going to have sheep nearby that they're probably going to mix in with," Klus said. "That's just going to give that group a little bit of a boost and help them expand a little more quickly."

By themselves, the group of 20 sheep introduced to the Mutton Mountains in 2002 has increased by 50 percent, even with some predation and a possible case of poaching since then.

The sheep were captured by helicopter, just as they were in 2002. Flying a powerful Hughes 500 aircraft was pilot Jim Pope Jr., of Leading Edge Aviation of Clarkston, Wash. On board to capture the sheep and keep them secure in their flight to both a base camp near Condon and then in their flight onto reservation land was a capture crew from Greybull, Wyo. The work in capturing wildlife is "high-risk, financially and physically," Klus said.

The animals are captured when a crewmember shoots a net out of a gun while the helicopter pursues them. After the

"For Deschutes River sheep, which we rounded up earlier in the year, it's always tough," he said. "It seems like it's tougher country, you always have to chase them a little harder, you have more issues with rolling down the hill as they're captured. Traditionally, sheep that come off the Deschutes tend to be a little more stressed."

Sheep are rounded up during the coldest times of the year because the cool weather reduces the threat of stress, when body temperatures are already overheating and heart rates rise above normal.

The base camp for last week's round-up was in a field southwest of Condon, where around 30 people, including tribal members, representatives of the Confederated Tribes, ODFW, Bureau of Land Management, interested local residents, and members of the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep (FNAWS) were gathered.

As soon as the quota of 15 destined for Eagle Creek was reached around mid-morning Saturday, the sheep were driven to a point on U.S. 97 near Criterion Summit, about eight miles south of Maupin.

Range and Agriculture Manager Jason Smith transported the sheep on mostly straight roads to minimize movement that might exacerbate stress levels, northwest to Wasco and south on U.S. 97 to Criterion Summit.

The staging area was wide enough for the helicopter to land and take off and for the sheep to be unloaded from the trailer, hobbled and loaded individually into denim and canvas bags for their transport into Eagle Creek canyon, 6.1 air miles west.

In groups of five, the sheep then took their second helicopter ride of the day and arrived at their new home. At Eagle Creek, a group of 10 people waited for the three loads of sheep. The group, including seven tribal members, was briefed on how to handle the animals once they arrived.

"The sheep are going to be coming in, they'll be in bags and hanging, kind of like daisy-chained down off of a cable," Luther instructed the group. "(After the bagged sheep are unclipped from the helicopter cable), two people teams will take a sheep and move it off to one side until we have five sheep all lined up."

The sheep were moved into a side-by-side line, where the bags were pulled off them, their blindfolds loosened, but not yet removed, and their hobbles removed.

"These animals are going to

be pretty stressed out," Luther warned. "They're going to be hot. They'll be panting and probably quivering, and what you don't want to do is if they start to struggle is kneel on their chest. They're pretty strong animals and they may try to scramble and get up."

Two-man teams were assigned for each sheep. While they stabilized the animal and avoided the sheep's horns or hooves, Dr. Pielstick examined each one, checking their breathing and movements and even the color of their gums for signs of stress or injury.

All this was done with utmost efficiency and as silently as possible to keep the sheep calm.

And when Pielstick gave the silent "go" sign, the blindfolds were removed from each sheep and they were let go, like the start of a race, and the sheep ran away, preferably in a southerly direction so they could encounter the most habitable spot for them.

"They're going to try to go up on steeper ground, but who knows," Luther told the group. "There's no control after you let them go, but they'll all find each other."

Fourteen of the 15 sheep swiftly galloped away, usually in groups. One didn't, however,

"...We'll just keep real close track of them for the next couple months."

Warm Springs Fish and Wildlife manager
Terry Luther

not immediately.

This was a ewe, the one that had been captured Friday. She spent Friday night alone in the horse trailer. The ewe appeared calm Saturday morning, standing in a docile fashion in the middle of the trailer, perhaps wondering of its destiny, perhaps wishing for company from her fellow sheep.

But when Pielstick deemed the sheep ready and cleared for their release into the hills, it didn't run away as the others had. It stayed put on the ground near the men who loosed it from its temporary bindings.

Pielstick shaved some hair from its throat with a battery-powered razor and instructed Joel Santos, part of the "ground crew" to hold and squeeze a bag of intravenous fluid into a needle placed under the skin in the ewe's neck.

"I was looking at the gums, they weren't nice and bright and pink like they should be," the veterinarian said. "They were kind of a pale, bluish color, so I assessed that she was a little



Spilyay photo / Brian Mortensen
Dr. Leon Pielstick, Burns, left, helps Larry Holliday and Don Winishut loosen the binds from a California mountain sheep after it was flown in from Criterion Peak Saturday afternoon.

shocky."

So he injected a fluid to counteract the shock and stress that had taken her over, and he injected a dextrose solution to give her an energy supply against the hypoglycemic shock he assessed.

"What happens on release is that the stress of capture can cause muscle damage, and we've done everything at base camp, and we've usually caught them to prevent that, but it's just

The mood of the group, made up of experienced hunters and outdoorsmen was enthusiastic yet laid back.

To a man, they said they enjoyed working with the sheep.

"Actually, I thought they would be bigger," said Lyman Jim, a technician for the Tribe's Fish and Wildlife Department.

Saturday's method of bringing the sheep onto the reservation was different from when it was done in 2002 at Antoken Creek, as the sheep were simply released from the back of a trailer. The release point Saturday was in a roadless area, requiring a hike of about a mile.

Saturday's release was the third mountain sheep round-up Warm Springs Fish and Wildlife management crews have been involved in. Luther, Doug Calvin and Stan Simtustus had participated in one in 2001.

To monitor the sheep, the Tribes has a pilot from Madras on contract who has a two-seat airplane to help observe the sheep herds.

"We'll fly particularly for these (sheep), we'll be flying early this next week, and monitor them really closely," Luther said. "We'll probably fly every week for about a month or a month and a half, and we'll see where they settle. And depending on where they're at, we'll walk in and do some observing and we'll just keep real close track of them for the next couple months."

"By then, they usually settle into an area, and then they're more predictable, and then we'll monitor them every couple of weeks."

Luther said that unless something catastrophic happened to the sheep herd, there may be no more need to move sheep into the reservation.



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