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Suspended UI prof repeats sheep claims in journal

- **November 16th, 2009**
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By John Miller Of The Associated Press

Marie Bulgin reiterates claims that bighorns do not get diseases from domestic sheep, despite pledging not to do so until University of Idaho completes its inquiry



This undated photo released by the Hells Canyon Bighorn Sheep Initiative shows a bighorn ram and oth... Associated Press

BOISE - A University of Idaho professor suspended from sheep research duties since June has repeated claims that wild bighorns don't catch fatal diseases from domestic sheep, despite pledging not to disseminate information on the issue until the school completes an inquiry into her work.

An August interview with Marie Bulgin, head of the UI's Caine Veterinary Teaching and Research Center in Caldwell, appeared in October's edition of *The Shepherd: A Guide for Sheep and Farm Life*, an industry journal based in New Washington, Ohio.

In the story, Bulgin insists there's no proof bighorns die after catching diseases from domestic sheep on the range.

"It's the bighorns' own pathogens that are killing them - not something they are picking up from domestic sheep or goats," she is quoted as saying.

Wildlife advocates said her comments are virtually identical to those that helped lead to the UI inquiry.

It was launched five months ago after environmentalists produced documents showing her research center had gathered evidence that bighorns get deadly disease from domestic sheep on the range since 1994 - a period in which Bulgin had been testifying for the ranching industry in federal court and at the Idaho Legislature that no such documentation existed.

"It's inappropriate for her to be doing this, pending conclusion of this review by the University of Idaho," said Craig Gehrke, regional director of The Wilderness Society in Boise, on Friday.

Bulgin, who has insisted she knew nothing about the 1994 studies that her daughter helped author, didn't immediately return a phone call Friday seeking comment.

In June, Bulgin was suspended from leading the Caine center as UI administrators intervened to address concerns about the integrity and accountability of their researchers' work and contributions to shaping public policy.

Bulgin also agreed to relinquish her involvement in sheep disease research and pledged to UI College of Agriculture and Life Sciences Dean John Hammel "to not write or disseminate any information until such time as the charges filed against me have been concluded," according to a June 17 letter from Bulgin to Hammel obtained by The Associated Press.

University officials said they were aware of the article and are considering it as they continue their review.

Idaho bighorn numbers have dwindled by half since 1990, to about 3,500 animals; many wildlife scientists are convinced contact between domestic sheep and bighorns reintroduced into the region in the 1970s is behind deadly disease outbreaks. It's a hot topic - disease transmission concerns figured prominently in an Oct. 14 federal court ruling that banished a rancher from his family's historic grazing ground along the Salmon River.

In the four-page Shepherd article, Bulgin contends bighorns carry a host of their own pathogens that turn fatal when combined with stress or other diseases.

Bulgin, a former Idaho Wool Growers Association president, also criticizes how the Idaho Department of Fish and Game manages bighorns, saying the agency refuses to keep them from wandering onto federal livestock grazing allotments on Bureau of Land Management or U.S. Forest Service-managed territory.

"The Fish and Game Department talks about managing wildlife, but to them management merely consists of setting the hunting seasons," Bulgin told the interviewer.

Biologists working with bighorns in western Idaho's Hells Canyon region along the Snake River said they were frustrated by Bulgin's contention in the article that bighorn sheep haven't been here "since the 1800s." They cite the Department of Fish and Game's 2004 restoration plan that concludes bighorns were historically abundant but vanished in 1945 due to competition with livestock, introduced diseases and overhunting.

"It is not the bighorn sheep that are intruding into the domestic sheep allotments," said Keith Lawrence, director