



# News for Stakeholders

March 2012

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## APHIS Veterinarians Play Critical Role in Bighorn Sheep Relocation Project

In February, two APHIS veterinarians from Nebraska—Drs. Gary Stevens and Bill Stump—partnered with colleagues from the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission (NGPC) and Canada’s Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resources Operations, as well as many other hardy and skilled volunteers, to move 41 wild bighorn sheep from the Canadian Rockies in Alberta to northwest Nebraska. This was the latest in a multi-year effort aimed at reestablishing healthy populations of free-ranging bighorn sheep in the State.





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The logistical challenges were many, as the animals first needed to be cleared for importation by Veterinary Services' (VS) National Center for Import and Export. Obtaining test results for the two major diseases of concern—bovine tuberculosis (TB) and brucellosis—would have been difficult, if not impossible, given the necessarily tight timeframes involved in the operation. For example, with TB skin testing, a veterinarian needs to visually confirm that no reaction has occurred 3 days after the initial test. While that is certainly reasonable for livestock, the bighorn sheep needed to be transported as quickly as possible following capture to their new range in Nebraska to avoid further, and possibly lethal, stress. Holding the animals in trailers to await test results was not feasible. To mitigate any disease risk, VS and Canadian officials determined that the bighorn sheep should be obtained from Alberta, where there is no history of brucellosis or TB and the animals had no contact with livestock. Additionally, VS agreed to collect blood samples and submit them for testing to the National Veterinary Services Laboratories prior to the animals crossing into the United States; the animals were also radio-collared in case there was ever a need to recover one. The VS veterinarians' solid, mutually-beneficial working relationships with their State colleagues really helped smooth the way. Previously, NGPC had helped with the transport and depopulation of a captive elk/fallow deer herd in the State that was heavily infected with TB; the VS vets had also assisted NGPC with a joint TB surveillance project in hunter-killed deer.

On the day of the capture operation, which took place in a reclaimed mining area, there was abundant sunshine and practically no wind. While these were nearly perfect weather conditions for humans, they weren't optimal for the wild bighorn sheep. To reduce stress as much as possible, the sheep were hobbled and blindfolded as quickly as possible after the capture net dropped. Canadian and Nebraska officials then evaluated and marked the animals that were going to be transported, separating out bigger rams and younger animals.



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The animals that were selected then underwent a physical exam, which involved collecting blood and DNA samples, monitoring body temperatures, determining ages, and administering treatments for internal parasites. The volunteers who were taking temperatures had a particularly important role—when an animal's body temperature rose above acceptable levels, the exam ceased and the animal was loaded onto a trailer.





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Altogether, the capture and load phase of the operation took about 2 hours—a truly amazing feat, considering the complexity and logistics involved. The bighorn sheep reached their new home in Nebraska just 2 days later, and all blood tests were negative for diseases of concern. If wildlife officials decide to pursue another bighorn sheep relocation effort, VS stands ready to assist with the next ‘ewe haul!’

