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GRAZING SHEEP on federal land in the Mountain states is an increasingly dicey proposition, regardless how strong the market might be. Ernie Etchart is following in the footsteps of his Basque immigrant father and finding increasing resistance from government bureaucrats who see no value in productive enterprise.

Running Sheep On Federal Land Is Not For The Faint-Hearted

By Colleen Schreiber

SILVERTON, Colo. — Ernie Etchart loves being in the sheep business; it's in his blood, but in the end he figures it's going to cost him his heart.

It's a figure of speech in a way, but in a way it's not. Etchart recently had an encounter with a disgruntled hiker while in the process of moving his shepherd's camp up on his federal grazing allotment above Silverton. As a bystander experiencing that encounter first-hand, it was easy to understand what he meant.

The conversation went like this:

“When I came through here the sheep were up on the wall (a steep incline above the road). The rocks were just pinging in the road. It was very dangerous. I just went fast and prayed,” the hiker said. “This is a lease car, and if there was any damage I would have had to pay for it.

“I believe when cars are coming, those sheep shouldn't be up there,” said the hiker. “If you're going to run sheep out here, doesn't that mean you have to do it responsibly?”

“But how do I know when to use it?” asked Etchart. “Cars travel these roads every day.”

“Yaw, but he (the herder) shouldn’t have those sheep up on the steep hillside except in the early morning or late at night,” the hiker said.

“A rock can come off in a rainstorm, and they do,” Etchart pointed out.

The hiker then started down another tangent.

“Do you run these sheep in the summer when the wildflowers are at their height?”

“Yes,” Etchart replied.

“So if I go in a basin and the sheep are in there, then it’s a ruined hike for me. It’s not the feces that I care about, it’s that the flowers are gone,” the hiker insisted.

“The sheep don’t really pick on the wildflowers until after it freezes,” Etchart pointed out.

“But the sheep trample them,” she insisted.

“Well, they could step on some,” Etchart conceded.

“Well, it’s a problem, and I’m writing a lot (emphasis on “a lot”) of letters, because I don’t think it’s right in certain basins to have sheep,” the hiker said. “You guys should have your right to graze, but there are certain basins that should be left because of tourism.”

“And there are,” responded Etchart.

“The U.S. Basin is the best basin for wildflowers,” the hiker said. “You run sheep there and in Porphyry Basin. I don’t care over here; this isn’t a hiking basin.”

The hiker then asked Etchart if he would be amenable to her suggestion to keep sheep out of some basins. Etchart explained that his dad started grazing this particular allotment in the 1940s.

The lady responded, “It doesn’t matter how long he’s been here.”

“It does matter how long,” Etchart insisted. “We’re running out of areas to run sheep to raise food for America.”

“It’s not America. How many steaks are you getting out of this herd?” asked the hiker. “That’s a few people compared to the tourism. It’s not all of America.”

“What about the benefits that we provide?” Etchart countered. “For every band of sheep that we run, some 18 jobs are created. We’re no longer a big industry, but we do add something to the economy. Plus, we’re using the resource in a sustainable way, and there are benefits to the resource from our use,” he explained.

Instead of acknowledging anything offered by Etchart, the hiker took off on another tangent. This time it was directed toward cattle.

“Well, I’m a farm girl from Kentucky, and we used to raise cattle. Then I became a hiker, and I’ve been all over Utah and Colorado, and in Utah I noticed what one small herd of cattle can do to one riparian area.”

Coming back to the wildflowers, the hiker said, “I’m a big botanist now.”

She insisted again that she thought it was more than fair that the sheep ranchers should cater to the whims of the recreationists, pointing out again that she was just asking that a few basins not be grazed.

Etchart noted to no avail that there are still wildflowers in the basins grazed by sheep.

“Sheep have been grazing here for 120-some years,” Etchart reiterated.

“Yes, but maybe if you could graze them later in the summer after the first of August,” said the hiker. “Like now; I don’t care what you graze now. Maybe you could just save the most pristine basins, those that are pristine, for native flowers, because I’m not the only one who likes to see that,” reminded the hiker.

“We already do that,” Etchart told her.

He told her of one basin in particular that is no longer grazed; it’s one with a lot of hikers, and the permittees made the decision on their own not to graze it because of problems with recreationists. It just was no longer worth the bother.

“As ranchers we realize that recreation is encroaching on us, but its federal land and we can’t stop it, so we try to work with everyone,” Etchart told the hiker, “but we’re running out of this land to graze, and not just this land but the lower land as well. So much of the lower country gets bought up for homes,” he continued, “and that not only hurts us, but wildlife habitat as well,” he pointed out. “If we don’t have this to use, we’ll be forced to sell our private land, and it will only get developed.”

Etchart simply asked the hiker to be cognizant of the other uses.

“You can see the recreational use and the old mining use. Can you really tell where the sheep have been if you hadn’t seen them?” he asked.

And with that they ended the conversation. The hiker was at least cordial and thanked Etchart for taking time to talk to her.

It was easy to see, though, that the episode was never far from Etchart’s mind throughout the entire day. Insisting that he’s never been accosted in person to that level, Etchart says nothing surprises him anymore. He’s learned over his 30-something year tenure that he doesn’t have much choice but to deal with these kinds of people; he’s mellowed a

lot as a result.

“It’s not a resource issue,” says Etchart. “They want to take these allotments away from us for reasons that we’ve worked so hard to mitigate...we work and work and still they’re never happy.”

He adds, “That conversation would not have lasted long with my dad.”

And perhaps for good reason. His father, Martin, a French Basque immigrant, came to America’s Uncompahgre Valley in far western Colorado on May 12, 1947. He came to herd sheep. Martin Etchart was 20 years young, full of ambition and hungry enough to work extra hard to achieve his goal. His goal was to make enough money so he could one day return to the old country, buy some land and start his own farming operation.

For some six years straight, Etchart was the faithful shepherd of a flock of 1500 ewes. During all those years, he never left his sheep to come to town.

An elderly sheepman, Howard Lathrop, took notice of the young, hard-working Basque immigrant and offered him a chance to buy him out. With the mortgage came 1500 ewes, a desert permit, high country permits, several thousand acres of private land leases, and a lease on some irrigated farmland. So it was that in 1954, with Lathrop’s help, the young Etchart started his own sheep operation.

Etchart’s early winter allotment was on what is now the Canyonlands National Park near Moab, Utah. Canyonlands became a national park in 1968, but they continued both sheep and cattle grazing in the park until 1975. Then one fall when his dad was making plans to take the sheep to his winter country, he received a letter saying that they would no longer be accepting sheep. Overnight his winter allotment was abolished. He was forced to sell a band of sheep because he had nowhere else to go with them on such short notice. Not only did he lose the allotment, but he lost the money he invested in the purchasing of the allotment.

Etchart understands that in all likelihood this will happen to him on the different allotments he currently has in the San Juan Mountains above Silverton, perhaps sooner rather than later.

Etchart and his fellow sheep producers, along with the American Sheep Industry Association, have worked diligently with the Forest Service and the BLM to address the issues and concerns of the recreationists. The permittees operate under a set of annual operation instructions which, in part, require them to tell the Forest Service, for example, where they expect to be on their allotments throughout the entire summer.

“We know within a couple of days where and when we’re going to move,” Etchart explains. “That hiker could look up those dates on an FS map, and if we’re not in a certain basin, she could go there to see her wildflowers.”

They also work with their herders to educate them about the recreationists. The herders know on the weekends and on holidays to keep the sheep away from the roads and trails when possible, and if they encounter recreationists, they know to push the sheep either up or down out of their path to minimize any possible contact with their livestock protection dogs.

Yet despite their efforts, Etchart and his fellow sheep producers are running into more and more people like the disillusioned hiker.

“A lot of these people want these basins untouched. I can’t jump from one hill and go to another and leave that basin alone, but nothing surprises me anymore...everyone thinks they’re entitled.”

And he runs into all kinds on the mountain. On the same day that he had the run-in with the disgruntled hiker he had a conversation with a motorcyclist decked out in leather and a pink tutu having her picture taken at the 12,730 feet elevation sign.

Referring to the disgruntled hiker again, Etchart continues, “We know we’re not ever going to change people like that. That’s why I say those kinds of challenges cost me my heart, because in my heart I still want to do this, and yet in the end I know it’s going to get broke someday when the Forest Service says, ‘Nope, you can’t go up there.’”

“If these sheep are \$200 a head this fall, it makes me wonder, ‘do I take that and run?’ Most of the time we do the dumb thing and keep going.

“It’s a numbers game,” he continues. “We’re outnumbered by the recreationists and those who work for the federal agencies such as the BLM and FS. Most of them have the same kind of mindset as that hiker, and they’re the ones in the end who dictate whether we go or we stay.”

Etchart grew up with the sheep. When he was 15, his dad got sick, so he took over running the sheep that summer, moving camps and packing in when necessary. But it was a different time back then. These small West Slope towns, many of which were former mining towns, appreciated and respected the sheep producers and what they contributed to the economy. But that was then. Today the number of domestic sheep grazing in the San Juan Mountains is a fraction of what once was. Now there are only five producers left that run, all total, 15,000 or so sheep as opposed to the 150,000 head that once grazed these valleys.

“At that time maybe it was too much,” Etchart acknowledges. “Back then they (the sheep utilized) took 50 to 60 percent of available forage, now we don’t even take 20 percent. Now we just top it, and keep going. We’ve had to go that route because recreation is such a large use, and it’s an economic driver, too. We could see the writing on the wall; we had to make room.”

Today Ernie and his younger brother, George, run four bands of sheep, which consists of 950 ewes and 1350 or so lambs, on their summer allotments in the San Juan Mountains. In the Silverton area one permit is

three permits combined; another is two combined permits. Each allotment is about 15,000 acres on average.

When Etchart graduated from high school in 1982, these same permits were highly sought after.

“If one of these allotments came up for sale, they could put it on the market at noon and it would be sold by that evening,” says Etchart. “Now no one wants these permits, just because of the federal land hassles, the recreationists and the environmentalists. Those weren’t really issues when I started in the business.”

The sheer number of people, Etchart says, is the biggest change he’s experienced. And it’s because of the people that Etchart has also had to change the way he runs his livestock protection dogs.

The Etcharts didn’t start running dogs with their sheep until the late 1980s, and it wasn’t until about five years ago that the people/dog issues really became a significant problem. That was about the time the Colorado portion of the Continental Divide Trail, a favorite of hikers and bikers, was finished. The 485-mile trail stretches from Denver to Durango. Now there are a ton of people trekking through Etchart’s sheep allotments, and that has made Silverton a hotbed activist community. These activists, Etchart says, ultimately would like to see all domestic livestock grazing eliminated from federal lands.

To mitigate the potential dog issues, Etchart has changed the way he develops his livestock protection dogs. For example, when Etchart first started running livestock protection dogs, two per band, he did not want the dogs to interact at all with humans. The dogs were to bond with the sheep, not people, so they could do their job — protect the sheep from coyotes, bears and in some cases wolves, though not on Etchart’s allotments.

That meant, though, that the dogs could be kind of aggressive towards humans, particularly if the human did not understand how to react when encountering a dog. Bicyclists, for example, should stop and get off their bicycle rather than continue trying to outrun the dog.

To mitigate these potential problems the dogs are now “socialized.”

“We make them people-friendly so that they don’t view humans as a threat to the sheep,” he explains.

There’s a Catch-22, though. The dogs are much more docile and consequently, Etchart concedes a few more predator losses because of it.

“We don’t have wolves yet. They’re to the south and to the north of us, so it’s only a matter of time. Then I don’t know what we’ll do, because the guard dogs we have now are so mellow that they don’t stand a chance against a wolf and, consequently, I don’t know that we’ll stand a chance.”

Not all of the tourists and recreationists dislike the sheep, the

herders and the dogs. Etchart had a positive experience a while back with two other hikers who happened to belong to a hiking club in Fort Collins. The hikers were positive and appreciative of Etchart, and on their *Facebook* pages posted what a positive and enjoyable experience they had when they encountered the sheep with their herders and the dogs. They've been in touch since and in a couple of months Bonnie Brown, executive director of the Colorado Wool Growers, is scheduled to give a presentation about livestock protection dogs, their use and what to do if encountering a dog while hiking to the 500-member hiking club.

Etchart also takes the time to post pictures and sheep-related commentary on his own *Facebook* page. He enjoys this and believes it serves some benefit in the education process.

Though the recreationist issues are frustrating and often challenging, it's the bighorn issue that is Etchart's number-one concern. It more than any of the other issues threatens to put him out of business. It is a complicated issue, particularly in relation to all of the federal requirements associated with the federal grazing leases. Often what happens is that these various requirements, such as environmental assessments and environmental impact statements are used to achieve an end goal not favorable to the permittees.

In general, though, the bighorn issue boils down to the fact that bighorn enthusiasts, biologists and the like blame domestic sheep for bighorn die-offs. They claim that domestic sheep transmit a pneumonia-causing bacteria to the bighorns. The fact of the matter, though, is that the degree of risk of potential disease transmission from domestic sheep to bighorn sheep under open range conditions is unknown.

Pen studies where domestic sheep and wild sheep are forced to have nose to nose contact are not indicative of what happens under normal range conditions, where the domestic sheep are herded and livestock protection dogs in all likelihood keep the domestic sheep from mixing with wild sheep. Yet it is the pen studies that the bighorn supporters, including the federal agencies and their biologists, continually rely on.

The bighorns were in the area when Etchart's dad first started herding sheep above Silverton. They're still there today; in fact, some of the most prolific bighorn populations in the state, an estimated 500 head, are on Etchart's sheep allotments above Silverton, and never have Ernie or his dad seen the bighorns mixing with the domestic sheep.

"If the domestic sheep really cause disease problems for the bighorns, I would have thought that over the last 100-plus years of domestic sheep grazing in these mountains, the bighorns would have died off, but they're still here," says Etchart.

If there's ever an allotment that for whatever reason reverts back to the USFS or BLM, that permit is not likely to be reissued. The feds, Etchart says, use the National Environmental Policy Act more or less as an excuse to keep them closed. NEPA requires federal agencies "to integrate environmental values into their decision-making processes by considering the environmental impacts of their proposed actions and

reasonable alternatives to those actions.”

The Forest Service is currently in the process of conducting the required environmental impact statement analysis on fellow sheep producer J. Paul Brown’s summer allotment on the Weminuche Wilderness Area in the San Juans. They’re trying mightily to implement the “Payette Principles” on Brown’s allotment, and in fact in all the western states where bighorns reside on federal lands. The Payette Principles in simplified terms are a set of rules that the USFS used to justify the removal of some 10,000 domestic sheep from grazing allotments on the Payette National Forest in Idaho.

The decision is currently under appeal by the Idaho Wool Growers, Colorado Wool Growers, Wyoming Wool Growers, ASI, the Public Lands Council and some named landowner plaintiffs. The reason this is so critical is because an estimated 25 percent of domestic sheep production is in bighorn habitat.

The federal agencies, Etchart insists, are “deathly afraid” of losing their jobs or being sued by the environmentalists, namely Western Watersheds Project and the Center for Biological Diversity.

“Those groups know how to play the NEPA games,” says Etchart.

It doesn’t matter, Etchart reiterates, that the sheep producers have effective tools — herders and livestock protection dogs — to keep separation between the domestic sheep and the wild sheep.

“Our shepherds are in tune with the situation,” says Etchart. “They understand that it’s imperative that we keep separation between the two.

“These bighorn sheep aren’t any different than our domestic sheep,” he continues. “When our sheep bed down, they bed down; they’re not nocturnal. If deer come in to the sheep at night, the dogs chase off the deer. So why wouldn’t they do the same with the bighorns?”

Etchart also points out that they have their sheep off the mountain by the time the bighorns come into estrous.

“Maybe that’s a positive; I don’t know, but for whatever reason we just don’t see them get together. And yet when we tell the feds that the two never mix, they dismiss that so fast. They say, ‘They’re there, and they could.’”

The latest twist is that the USFS is requiring sheep producers to collar at least some of their sheep with GPS devices to track where the sheep have been. They’re just now beginning to collar some of the wild sheep as well.

Etchart considers this latest requirement a two-edged sword, and one that most likely the domestic producers will come out on the wrong side of.

“They could say that our sheep were at such and such a locale at the same time the wild sheep were there, and regardless of whether

there's a problem, their answer to mitigate any possible future problems will be to remove domestic sheep, no questions asked," says Etchart.

"Supposedly, nose to nose is a sure transmission of the disease, but on the ground they don't really know enough to be able to say 100 percent for sure that is the truth and yet they proclaim it like it's the gospel."

In the Payette decision it was clear that the judge did not take into account or even consider the research offered in one of the briefs and in direct testimony by the USDA Agricultural Research Service's premiere infectious disease specialist, Don Knowles. ARS' review of the pen studies pointed out that the most significant part of the research is that the domestic sheep had fence line contact with wild sheep for two months and yet the wild sheep did not contract pneumonia. The wild sheep got sick only when they crowded wild sheep in with the domestic sheep and the two species were forced to live nose to nose.

Etchart wants to be optimistic that common sense will win out, yet he can't help but be concerned, because he knows most of the federal biologists are on the side of the bighorns; they're "wildlife educated." His neighbors are closer to the bighorn's core areas, but once the federals get them, his buffer is gone.

"There's still so much unknown about the bighorn/domestic sheep interaction, yet they manage for ultimate protection of the bighorn. What if they get rid of the domestic sheep on federal lands, which will essentially eliminate an entire industry, and then in 20 years the bighorns still haven't increased? Then what? I guess they can always bring more lamb in from Australia," he quips.

Another hot-button topic that remains on Etchart's radar is the growing issues caused by immigration rights activists. Most of the hullabaloo comes from the activists themselves, not the herders. The activists complain that the herders' living quarters — their tents and camp wagons — are severely lacking in terms of modern conveniences. Never mind the fact that most of the herders, the majority of which are Peruvians, live in shacks at best back home in Peru. They contend that the herders should have running water and electricity in their camps.

They also contend that the herders are forced to live in isolation despite the fact that the herders choose to come to America to herd sheep in return for a fair wage, far more than any amount they could make back home. In fact, Etchart says, after five years or so, most of the herders have a leg up and are able to return home to their families and build a home for them to live in.

Etchart values his herders; without them he would not be able to run as many sheep.

"I manage people; they manage my sheep, and right now I have the best crew I've had in a long time," he says.

His herders have the opportunity to work their way to a higher pay scale. They're also paid a bonus based on the number of lambs from their band that go on the truck at the end of the season. Etchart happily pays

more, because if a herder walks off, for whatever reason, it costs him a lot more, not only in lost sheep but in the time that it takes to get a herder replaced through the H2-A program.

“We have to know four months in advance what our labor needs are going to be,” Etchart explains. “So if one walks off or gets hurt, it puts me in a bind, because I can’t just call up and get another one and get him here the next day or the next week. It takes four months.”

Etchart sees his herders at least once every five days. On the allotments where he has to pack in the supplies, it’s typically once a week.

“I’m their psychologist, their banker — whatever they need, I provide — but without them I don’t survive.”

He doesn’t just drop off the supplies after a short conversation; he takes time to have a real conversation, often over a cup of coffee back at camp. He learned the importance of taking time for his herders from his father. Now 88, his dad still likes to come with Ernie to the summer high country. He has a kinship with the Peruvian herders, as he understands what it is like to leave family and friends behind to come to a new country.

Yet, the well-schooled immigrant sheep herder turned sheep rancher doesn’t hesitate to offer his opinions about certain things — cell phones, for instance. All the herders now have cell phones, and some, Ernie says, manage to rack up some pretty large cell phone bills.

“It drives my dad crazy. He sees these guys on the phone, and in his thick French-Basque accent he tells them, ‘Throw that cell phone away. You never make no money. Do like me; write letter.’ They just laugh; they know my dad. He still gives all of us technical support,” Etchart quips.

Despite all the challenges, Etchart can’t help but love his sheep. You hear it in his voice; you see it in his eyes and in his actions when dealing with his herders, the dogs and even the recreationists that he stops to have a conversation with, good or bad.

And though he’s lived here all his life, he does not take the beauty of it all for granted. Going up Gladstone Pass he talks about the country.

“This is really good sheep country,” says Etchart. “This piece happens to be a little steep, but the sheep hold really well in this country. The cool temperatures, the feed and the water — that’s what makes this great. The sheep don’t go looking for feed or water; it’s everywhere, and they don’t have to shade up.

“Some of the best lambs that come out of the state come out of these mountains here,” he continues. “The lambs from Montrose, Meeker and Craig, those are the premier western slope lambs.”

On this particular day he had two camps to move.

“This herd started lambing the 20th of March,” he explains. “This is our oldest bunch, but this year there was a lot of snow in the high country and it took a little longer for it to melt off and for things to warm up and start to bloom, so we were a little late getting here.

By this time of the year the lambs are putting on half a pound to three-quarters of a pound on a good day.

“Once the weather starts getting cold, it does something to the feed. It really starts sticking to their ribs.”

The schooled sheepman and even the sheep know that the time to head back down the mountain is quickly approaching.

“The longer we can keep them here, the better we’ll do. The trouble is, if we keep them too long then we start pushing snow and we can get snow here anytime now. It’s time for us to go.”

He’d already set the next move in motion. The Etcharts have three trucks of their own; it takes six in all to get one band shipped in a day. The week of the 8th each of the three bands, one at a time, was to be dropped down into a nearby corral and then shipped home to their private ground at Montrose.

“More land around Montrose was paid for with sheep than any other commodity,” insists Etchart. Then he adds, “The feed at home is terrific this year.”

The lambs will stay on their private ground until the first of October. By then he expects the lambs to average 120 pounds across the board.

The brothers have long done business with Mike Harper, who has a feedlot in Eaton. Already they have their lambs contracted and it’s going to be a good year. Still Etchart has been through a fair share of lamb market wrecks in his 30-plus years of being in the business. The last decade, though, has been a good one. Eight of the last 10 years have been profitable, and the last four out of six have been particularly good.

“Up until the last few years we could buy feed cheaper than we could raise it, but the last five years it’s been worth it to us to also have a farm. Hay has been high, corn was high; it’s going to be a lot cheaper this year.”

Coming back down the mountain, Etchart’s mind returns to the earlier incident with the chagrined hiker and the harsh reality of his future in the sheep business on federal lands.

“This could die right here with us,” he laments. “We could downsize considerably and just run on private ground and do away with all this extra labor expense, and maybe have one guy instead of seven and try to make it that way. George and I have talked about that,” he admits.

Ernie and his wife, Chris, have two children, as do George and Jackie. George’s two sons are back working fulltime on the farm and

Ernie's son and daughter are away at college.

“Dad always wanted us to do sheep when we were growing up,” says Etchart. “Not too long ago he said he didn't know if he told us right. I think he did; we know we have a fight on our hands, and we know we have to be able to fight it if we want to continue.

“I just don't know if anything we're doing, the changes we continue to make to accommodate the recreationists and the environmentalists is ever going to be enough to allow us to stay with our sheep.”

He admits he's thought about the inevitable possible what-ifs, but adds, “I've never made it past the point of not having sheep yet. Although I think about it more and more; it's more of a possibility for my kids, and I don't want them to have to face it, just knowing what it would do to me.”

No doubt running sheep on federal lands is not a job for the faint-hearted.

“These mountains get steeper each year,” he quips, “and these gray hairs are here for a reason.

“Will there be a day we lose? Probably, but I've still got a little gas left in the engine.”

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