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SANPETE COUNTY SHEEP TRAIL CLOSURE

By

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Sanpete County Sheep Trail Closure
Darwin B. Nielsen, Gary Andersen, and Nyle Mathews

Personnel from the United States Forest Service (USFS), Manti-LaSal National Forest, Price, Utah office have proposed closure of the sheep trials that have been used to move sheep from private land on the face of the mountains over the top to USFS allotments further east. Private rangeland extends to quite high elevations up the mountains on the east side of Sanpete County, especially above Fairview and Mt. Pleasant. Thus, it is a relatively short drive over the summit and on to their individual grazing allotments. Snow banks usually persist at the crest of the mountains until the mid summer season. In the past, the sheep were driven across the snow drifts that were on the trail at the time the USFS grazing allotments were ready for grazing. Trampling of the trail below the snow drift in the wet area created by the melting snow has been judged unacceptable by USFS personnel. Thus, trailing would only be allowed, if at all, after the snow banks have melted and the trail has had time to dry. This could delay USFS allotment turn-on dates from two weeks to possibly a month depending on the year.

Ranchers were faced with two alternatives: (1) keep their sheep on private rangeland until the trails were dry, then trail to the grazing allotment; or (2) drive the sheep off the mountain to loading facilities at Mt. Pleasant, Utah and haul them to the top of the mountain, unload and drive them to the various grazing allotments. Alternative (1) has the disadvantage of having to wait until the trails are dry since the rancher would have to provide two-four weeks of additional feed from private sources. The USFS would also lose the grazing fee for the time of the delayed turn-out. Ranchers expressed several concerns about the trucking alternative. Cost of trucking was probably the most
important item discussed. Other concerns were possible death loss of ewes and lambs, and increased numbers of bumbled lambs because they became separated from their mothers during trucking. Most of these sheep have never been trucked before which made the ranchers apprehensive about what would happen.

Ranchers, county officials, and USFS personnel held meetings to see if a solution could be worked out for the 1991 grazing season. They agreed to a plan where trailing would be permitted if 20 percent of total number of sheep involved were trucked. All of the affected ranchers agreed to help pay the cost of trucking the 20 percent. The ranchers who were going to truck were identified and were willing to follow the plan. As the grazing season approached, ranchers were informed by USFS that they could go on the allotments immediately if they trucked, but they would have to wait for the trails to dry if they wanted to drive their sheep to the allotments. The alternative of going on the forest immediately if trucked, or waiting two weeks or longer to trail, put pressure on ranchers to truck. Thus, the plan to share trucking costs and truck only 20 percent failed as more ranchers were willing to truck to take advantage of an earlier turn-out.

Sheep were loaded and trucked to the top of the mountains on July 9-11, 1991, on at least one morning it was raining. Personnel from USU Extension Service were on the site during the trucking process to observe the condition of the sheep and the procedures used in loading and unloading them. Estimated weight on lambs at moving time was 30-40 lbs with birth dates from the 1st - 10th of April.

The trucks used were owned and operated by professional sheep truckers in the area. They were semi-trucks of various types: semi-truck and trailer, semi-truck two
trailers configuration. The truckers knew how to load the sheep for this length and type of transport. However, additional care could have been exercised at unloading to prevent possible injuries to ewes and lambs. For example, some ewes and lambs fell or jumped from the third deck to the ground, other lambs were forced to jump because the unloading chute did not cover the entire space of the door opening. Several ewes hit a chain that was used to hold the unloading chute together at the top boards, this chain was later undone to prevent problems. Given these potential problems, no injured ewes or lambs were observed as a result of the loading or unloading process. A couple of injuries were reported on a load that was unloaded prior to the time observers arrived on the scene. Also, a crippled ewe was reported to be in the unloading area a day after she was unloaded.

An important consideration when making the decision to haul sheep is to be able to keep them off water and feed for several hours before hauling. Those that were "dried out" came off the trucks looking clean which should help as the ewes and lambs try to mother-up. One load had some lambs that were wet and covered with sheep droppings to some degree. It has not been determined if this was enough to cause any problems. The sheep specialist on the team indicated that ewes and lambs of the size we were dealing with, do not use smell as much as sound to find each other.

In one of the meetings, a statement was made that ewes and lambs would have to be close herded (held together) for 2-3 days after being trucked so that they could "mother-up". The actions of the owners and herders at the unloading site did not appear
to be such that they were worried about the problem. The sheep were held together around the trucks as they were unloaded then moved off toward their allotment.

These professional sheep truckers charged $250 per truck, per trip. Each truck can haul between 200-250 ewe/lamb pairs per load. This would put the cost of trucks between $1 and $1.24 per ewe moved. In addition, the cost of moving sheep to loading facilities and loading them must be considered. The truckers furnished part of the labor to load and all of the labor to unload the trucks. Based on observations at the loading corrals, it is estimated that five men, in addition to the truck crew, could handle the job. To move the sheep to the corral and load them would require 10 man hours of labor at $6 per hour or $60. This would put the cost per ewe, assuming 250 hd per load at $.24. The cost of unloading and moving to the allotment would not be significantly different than the cost of trailing.

A somewhat superficial inspection of the sheep at loading and unloading indicated several lame ewes in most herds, some with bad udders and some lambs already bummed because of other problems. Bummer lamb problems due to trucking seem almost impossible to estimate. If more lambs were bummed, one would expect lower lamb weights in 1991 for those who trucked versus those who trailed. The data are not consistent with this idea. In addition, many other variables impact weights that would easily account for the differences reported.

A questionnaire was used to gather information from sheep ranchers involved in this trucking-trailing problem. The data were collected after the 1991 grazing season and are summarized in Table 1. Ten ranchers responded to the request for information.
Summaries of this information and observations by livestock specialists involved in the study could not verify that trucking caused an increased number of lambs to be bummed. Most ranchers reported an increase in losses due to predators during the 1991 grazing season. Some indicated it could be related to more bummer lambs, but there was no clear evidence to substantiate this claim. Ranchers who trailed also reported higher predator losses. No information was gathered or reported from animal damage control personnel on their 1991 program on these allotments.

Ranchers will probably continue to accept trucking of their sheep to USFS grazing allotments as long as they are forced to truck or wait two weeks or longer before they would be allowed to trail their sheep. In any case, the cost of trucking and other related costs of trucking are added costs relative to the situation that existed before USFS personnel imposed the trailing regulation.

The average cost per ewe for trucking was $1.21 plus $.24 for additional labor based on the ranchers who responded to the questionnaire and observations taken at the loading corral which makes the total $1.45. This amounts to $7.25 ($1.45 x 5 = $7.25) per animal unit or $2.42 per AUM assuming a three-month grazing season on USFS lands. The cost of trucking is higher than the 1991 grazing fee collected by USFS.

Ranchers who happen to have plenty of feed on private lands, owned or leased, may find it less expensive to wait for the trail to be opened and trail to the allotment. The option to lease private range for a two-week period is probably not available to very many ranchers. If it costs a rancher $10/AUM to lease land and get his sheep on and off the land to go on the forest, this alternative would cost the rancher $1 per ewe for the two
week period. ($10 \div 5 \text{ sheep per AU} = \$2 \text{ per ewe per month or } \$1 \text{ for 14 days}) If a rancher is forced to overuse his private rangeland while he waits for the trail to open because he cannot afford to truck his sheep, the net damage to ranges in the county could be higher than the trail damage if used when wet.

Sanpete County land-use planners should be interested in the condition of all lands in the county-public or private. If this is the case, one might want to consider the sheep trail problem from the net impact on the land resource of the county. What is the resource impact of sheep grazing private lands up the face of the mountain then driving them in a rather "close herd" configuration down these slopes to the base of the mountain so that they can be driven to corrals for trucking to the forest? Is this alternative less damaging than using a wet trail?

Ranchers who trailed their sheep to USFS allotments in 1991 reported increased trailing over the usual trailing situation. Some of the reports were as follows: trailed 2.5 days instead of the usual 8 hours; trailed 2.5 days versus usual 1/2 day; one more day on trail than usual and two days longer on trail than usual. Most, if not all, of this extra trailing occurred on USFS land. What was the net resource impact of extra trail time versus the use of wet trails?

One more observation on trucking versus trailing, if the U.S. Government is serious about reducing use of fossil fuels and safety, how could they (USFS) recommend trucking sheep over 30-40 miles of steep mountain roads which use fossil fuels and increase danger on this highway with trucks of this size and the slow speeds they can travel up the mountain. The sheep could walk and spend little, if any, time on the highway.
Table 1. Summary of Responses from Sheepmen who Trucked or Trailed to allotment 1991

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Truck or Trail</th>
<th>Range Ready Date</th>
<th>Date on Allotment</th>
<th>Date on if Trailed</th>
<th>Cost/Ewe Trucked</th>
<th>Lamb Wts. Past Ave.</th>
<th>1991 Ave.</th>
<th>Other Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Truck</td>
<td>July 3</td>
<td>July 8</td>
<td>July 15</td>
<td>$1.27</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>Lambs born 1 month later 1991</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Truck</td>
<td>July 6</td>
<td>July 8</td>
<td>July 15</td>
<td>$1.15</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>Predation problems 10% loss lambs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Trail</td>
<td>July 1</td>
<td>July 10</td>
<td>July 10</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>Trailed 2.5 days vs 8 hrs-30 more miles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Truck</td>
<td>July 5</td>
<td>July 10</td>
<td>July 15</td>
<td>$1.35</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>Trailed 2.5 days vs .5 days predator loss 40 lambs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Trail</td>
<td>July 6</td>
<td>July 10</td>
<td>July 10</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>Trailed 2.5 days vs .5 days predator loss 40 lambs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Trail</td>
<td>July 1</td>
<td>July 18</td>
<td>July 18</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>One extra day on trail-plenty feed on private range</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Truck</td>
<td>July 1</td>
<td>July 3</td>
<td>July 13</td>
<td>$1.17</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>Decision on trail when dry dragged on forever</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Trail</td>
<td>July 1</td>
<td>July 19</td>
<td>July 15</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>Trailed 2.0 days longer than usual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Truck</td>
<td>July 1</td>
<td>July 5</td>
<td>July 15</td>
<td>$1.14</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>Predation by coyote and bear up - could be more bummed lambs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Truck</td>
<td>July 1</td>
<td>July 9</td>
<td>July 15</td>
<td>$1.14</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>Predation by coyote and bear up - could be more bummed lambs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ave. cost of trucking $1.21/ewe