

VAIL HOMEOWNERS ASSOCIATION

Citizens to Protect Our Wildlife

Action Notice

June 4, 2019

CC: Action Notice: 060419

To VHA Members and Constituencies: The VHA Board of Directors desires that the following correspondence be delivered to its members and constituencies. A group of Vail citizens are preparing a letter to Gov. Polis seeking his help to save the East Vail sheep herd. This is not a VHA proposal. We are, however, sending the below letter from a Vail citizens committee to our membership urging you to participate as you see fit.

Dear Friend: A group of Vail citizens are preparing the attached letter to be sent to Gov. Polis asking his help to save the East Vail sheep. Please take a moment to review the letter and, if you are supportive and would like to be a signatory on the letter, please respond to this email. Do NOT click REPLY TO ALL to avoid jamming up everyone's email. The first hearing on the East Vail project is scheduled for June 24th so we would like an immediate response. Because the time is so short, they are not collecting actual signatures, only listing people by name and their general location; i.e., Vail, Edwards, etc. If you would like to be listed please give us the name as you would like it to be listed (including any spouse, significant other, etc. who would also like to join) and your location.

CITIZENS TO PROTECT OUR WILDLIFE
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June 7, 2019

Governor Jared S. Polis and First Gentleman Marlon Reis
C200 E Colfax Ave.
Denver, CO 80203

RE: East Vail bighorn sheep

Dear Governor Polis and First Gentleman Reis:

We are a group of citizens who live in the Town of Vail and the wider Eagle River valley. We write you because our resident herd of Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep is in immediate danger of being driven to extinction. We do not seek any money, just your help.

As you know, these majestic animals are the official Colorado State Animal. As far as anyone knows, the Vail herd was here well before there was even a thought of a ski resort. In the 1990s, the herd numbered about 150 animals, but after a disastrous 2007-2008 winter, the herd declined to about 40 to 50 animals and has not been able to bounce back in the intervening years.

Years ago the herd had an extensive range in an area near the East Vail I-70 interchange on the eastern side of Vail, spending the summer in higher elevations and the winter lower down where foraging is easier. The lower winter range has been squeezed by development over the years to the point that today the herd has an effective winter range of only 277 acres.

That limited range is now in danger of being further reduced to a size that will no longer allow survival of the herd. That is because of a planned five acre development of 73 units designed for 200+ people, which would sit astride the heart of the sheep's winter range. The impact of that development, if approved, would not be restrained to just the area of the project as the "zone of influence" from human activity on the site will extend out in all directions for several hundred yards. This will have a catastrophic effect on the sheep. If the herd declines much further, it will reach a "small population" tipping point where it can no longer regenerate itself.

Bighorn Sheep are easily stressed by human activity, and this project would place a great deal of human activity-- noise, light, odors and other human activity--in the midst of the sheep's winter range. Winter is a time of starvation for Bighorns so any reduction in the available feeding periods can impact their survival. Even small disturbances, where grazing is interrupted, harmfully increases heartbeat, respiration and calorie consumption. And the impact is greater if the sheep run off, even for a few yards.

In addition, ewes are pregnant during the winter, and any impacts to their overall health impacts the unborn lambs. Lambs that are born subpar are at a greater risk of not surviving their first year. If the ewes do not regain their overall health, they will not breed the next year. So the impacts from one winter can impact the population for 2 or more years, and impacts from continuous human activities will be forever. Using known human impact distances, scientists say that the housing project will drive sheep out of up to 80 acres, approximately 30% of their critical winter range.

The area involved is also an important north/south migration corridor across I-70, only one of two in the Town of Vail. It is used by elk, deer, bear and other migrating animals, as well as Peregrine Falcons, who use the area for nesting and hunting, and black bears that use the area for summer foraging. Unfortunately the proposed development will sit at a choke point in the corridor so it will effectively close it off. Loss of this critical corridor will not necessarily drive those animals to extinction, but it will negatively impact their populations which have already been severely reduced.

A prime community value of Vail has always been protection of wildlife and the natural environment of the area, but we are concerned that this development is on a fast track for approval. The property is owned by Vail Resorts, and it has already pushed through zoning changes to permit the development and has made a deal with a local developer to build the project. They have also engaged what in our opinion is a compliant biologist who seems ready to support the development. Now an application for

the project has just been filed and the first hearing has been scheduled for June 24th. We are fearful that the Town is poised to approve the project because the planned use is for employee housing which is a top priority for the Town of Vail.

We do not believe these Bighorn Sheep should be abandoned to their fate. Because these beautiful animals are the official state animal and you have made animal welfare a mission of your administration, we are asking for your help. We have already contacted the Division of Parks and Wildlife who informed us that they have not been monitoring our herd because it is a non-hunting herd. Nevertheless, their help could be instrumental if they would weigh in during the Town approval process with scientific expertise to explain the danger to the herd and rebut what we believe are unfounded assumptions of the developer's biologist.

Beyond that, we believe it would make a huge difference if you two would lend your support to saving our Bighorns. There are, of course, many ways to do that. A site visit, with attendant media, and a public statement of support would have a huge impact. If you would make a site visit, we could arrange the logistics and assure a large turnout. If a visit is not possible, a letter of support could make a difference.

We believe that with vision, leadership and political will, these majestic animals can be saved. We hope that the two of you can help us.

Thank you for your consideration.

Very truly yours,