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U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE AND ARIZONA GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT**JOINT NEWS RELEASE:**

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Partners in Kofa National Wildlife Refuge bighorn sheep restoration effort announce moratorium on mountain lion control

YUMA — In support of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (Service) intention to develop a mountain lion management plan and environmental assessment for the Kofa National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge), the Arizona Game and Fish Department (Department) has agreed to suspend for up to a year the lethal removal of any mountain lions captured and GPS-collared on the Refuge. On-refuge mountain lion capturing, collaring, and monitoring activities will continue.

The Service's intention to develop the lion management plan, consistent with the National Environmental Policy Act, was previously noted in updates to the Department's public Web site on the bighorn restoration effort. The plan helps fulfill one of the recommendations in the June 2007 joint Service-Department "Investigative Report and Recommendations for the Kofa Bighorn Sheep Herd" report, which was written to help inform Service and Department efforts to restore the Kofa desert bighorn sheep. The Service intends to start the public scoping process for development of a lion management plan later this month.

"This agreement between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Arizona Game and Fish Department will allow us to continue to conduct valuable research on mountain lions and their impacts on the Kofa herd of desert bighorn sheep while concurrently carrying out a public process to develop a mountain lion management plan," said Mitch Ellis, manager of the National Wildlife Refuge.

The Kofa herd was once one of the most robust herds in the nation and has been a critically important source of transplant sheep for restoring desert bighorn sheep to Arizona and other southwestern United States mountain ranges for 51 years. Historically, the Refuge has been home to a population averaging 760 bighorns. However, since 2006 the estimated population has dropped to an historic low of 390 animals. Transplants have been suspended since that time.

Wildlife experts attributed the decline to a variety of potential factors, including drought, predation, wildlife water management, disease factors and human disturbance. It has been estimated that at least five lions had been spending enough time in the refuge portion of the Kofa Mountains Complex to be considered "resident." Given the historical non-transient nature of this population, the resident lions were likely a significant cause of bighorn mortality.

Since June 2007, the Department has lethally removed two lions from lands surrounding the Kofa NWR after each had killed at least two bighorn sheep within a six-month period, which is the definition of an “offending lion” under both the joint investigative report and the Department’s May 2007 “Kofa Mountains Complex Predation Management Plan.” The suspension of lethal removal actions pertains only to lions that have been collared on Kofa Refuge.

“This agreement is consistent with the spirit of close cooperation and coordination between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Arizona Game and Fish Department that has characterized agency bighorn restoration efforts from the beginning of this challenge,” said Department spokesman Gary Hovatter.

Kofa National Wildlife Refuge was established in 1939. The refuge encompasses 665,400 acres of pristine desert that is home to the desert bighorn sheep and the California fan palm, the only native palm in Arizona. Bighorn sheep are found chiefly in the two mountain ranges that dominate the refuge landscape - the Kofa and Castle Dome Mountains. Although these mountains are not especially high, they are extremely rugged and rise sharply from the surrounding desert plains, providing excellent bighorn sheep habitat. Significant management emphasis remains on maintaining the bighorn sheep population. The management of mountain lions is part of a multi-faceted program to meet the objectives for desert bighorn sheep on the Refuge.

More details, to include copies of the joint investigative report and the Department predation management plan, and monthly updates on restoration activities are at the Department’s Kofa Web site: www.azgfd.gov/kofa.

Additional information on the Kofa National Wildlife Refuge is available at the Service’s Web site: www.fws.gov/southwest/refuges/arizona/kofa

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