United States
Department of the Interior

U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
Southwest Arizona National Wildlife Refuge Complex
356 West 1st Street
Yuma, Arizona 85364
(928) 783-7861, (928) 783-8611 fax

April 23, 2008

Dear Citizen,

The U.S Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA), will be preparing an environmental assessment (EA) of alternatives for the management of mountain lions (*Puma concolor*) on the Kofa National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge).

The Refuge was established in 1939 by Executive Order 8039 "for the conservation and development of natural wildlife resources." Also relevant is the Arizona Desert Wilderness Act of 1990, which designated more than 540,000 acres of the Refuge as wilderness. As such, the management of wilderness resources becomes a purpose within and supplemental to the original purposes of the Refuge. A driving force behind the original establishment of the Refuge was the protection of desert bighorn sheep (*Ovis canadensis mexicana*), and significant management emphasis remains on maintaining the bighorn sheep population. The management of mountain lions is proposed as part of a multi-faceted program to meet the objectives for desert bighorn sheep on the Refuge. The need for this action and a description of the project is attached.

Please note that the formal scoping period for the development of this EA will begin April 24, 2008 and end at close of business on May 24, 2008. The FWS, through the scoping process, is seeking input to facilitate early identification of concerns, potential impacts, and possible alternative actions. The FWS is the lead agency and ultimately responsible for the scope of the EA. Suggestions obtained during scoping are considered to be advisory. The FWS has not scheduled a formal public scoping meeting. A draft EA will be developed and provided to the public for review and comment subsequent to the scoping period.

If you need additional information, feel free to visit our office or contact Susanna Henry at this office, (928)783-7861 ext. 15. Comments that you wish to be entered into the record must be submitted in writing (hard copy or email). Please submit your comments to our email address at KofaLionComments@fws.gov or our mailing address at 356 West 1st Street, Yuma, AZ 85364.

Sincerely,

Mitch Ellis
Complex Manager
Southwest AZ National Wildlife Refuge Complex

Attachment: Description of Proposed Project

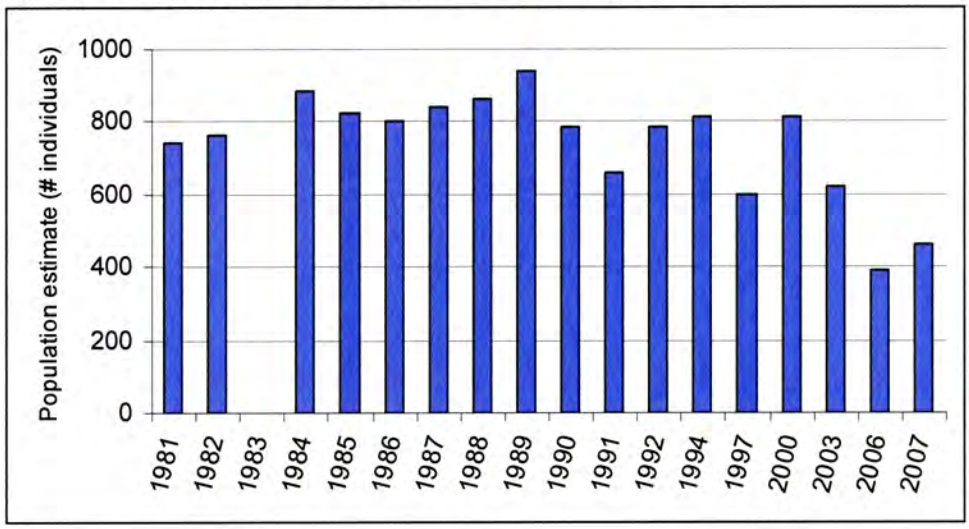
DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED PROJECT

Project Name: Mountain Lion Management on the Kofa National Wildlife Refuge

Project Location: Kofa National Wildlife Refuge
La Paz and Yuma Counties, Arizona

Need for the Action:
The Refuge contains a major portion of the largest contiguous habitat for desert bighorn sheep in southwestern Arizona and historically has been home to a population averaging 760 bighorns. The Refuge has served as the primary source of bighorn sheep for translocations to reestablish and supplement extirpated or declining populations throughout southern Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and Colorado. Population estimates from systematic aerial surveys indicate that a 50% decline in the size of the Refuge sheep population occurred between the years 2000 - 2006 (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Kofa NWR Bighorn Sheep Populations Estimates, 1981-2007*



* Population estimates from 1981-1991 were obtained using different survey methods than estimates from 1992-2006. Data prior to 1992 are not directly comparable to data obtained after 1992 but is used to show trends.

In response to this decline, the Refuge and the Arizona Game and Fish Department (AGFD) have conducted an analysis of the probable causes of the decline and are currently implementing a strategic management program intended to lead to the recovery of this important wildlife resource. Several studies and monitoring projects have been initiated or enhanced. Some of the more important aspects of this broad program include more frequent bighorn population surveys, monitoring and maintaining water availability, assessing body condition and disease in the bighorn population, monitoring disturbance attributable to human recreation, and monitoring the extent of predation and its impacts on the population. Many of the elements in this management program have been addressed through prior planning documents and require little additional review. Others, such as the proposed lethal control of mountain lions, have not been previously addressed and therefore require NEPA analysis and public review.

Project Description:
The proposed project is to allow for the limited removal, by government agents, of individual lions identified as regularly preying on sheep. The lethal removal of "offending lions" in order to recover and manage bighorn sheep would be used when population levels of sheep fall below an identified threshold. A mountain lion would be considered an "offending lion" if it preyed on more than one sheep in a six month period. If sheep populations are above the threshold, lion control would be suspended. This is one of several management strategies intended to maintain the desert bighorn sheep population on the Refuge at levels commensurate with habitat conditions and at a level able to support transplants for reintroduction efforts elsewhere.

Additional Information:
Additional information on the history of the Refuge and its purpose, goals, objectives, and management strategies can be found in the *Kofa National Wildlife Refuge & Wilderness and New Water Mountains Wilderness Interagency Management Plan and Environmental Assessment: EA-AZ-055-95-105, October 1996*. Pertinent information can also be found in the April 2007 report titled *Investigative Report and Recommendations for the Kofa Bighorn Sheep Herd* prepared jointly by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Arizona Game and Fish Department. Both documents, along with other detailed information, are available at the following website: www.fws.gov/southwest/refuges/arizona/kofa.