



Contact:

Bob Miles, (623) 236-7226
Public Information Officer

Arizona Game and Fish Department

NEWS RELEASE

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Game and Fish removes sheep-eating lion

Wildlife management action taken to assist struggling bighorn sheep population

YUMA, Ariz. – The Arizona Game and Fish Department on Tuesday afternoon lethally removed a mountain lion known to be preying heavily on bighorn sheep in the Kofa Mountains Complex Predation Management Area in southwestern Arizona.

The lion was taken in the Eagletail Mountains located about 90 miles northeast of Yuma.

The action was taken in a continuing effort to help restore the struggling Kofa bighorn sheep population, whose numbers declined more than 50 percent from an estimated 815 in 2000 to a low of 391 in 2006. The most recent survey in 2008 indicated an estimated population of 436.

The mountain lion was killed in accordance with the department's May 2007 "Kofa Mountains Complex Predation Management Plan," which is in place to monitor and limit predation during recovery efforts of this historic and critically important bighorn sheep population. The plan stipulates that an offending mountain lion—defined as one that kills more than one bighorn sheep within a six-month period—may be lethally removed when bighorn sheep population levels are below a certain threshold.

The lion, a male fitted with a telemetry collar, was known to have killed 15 bighorn sheep, 11 within the predation management area, since being collared in late February.

"This one lion was averaging a bighorn sheep kill every 10 days," said Pat Barber, supervisor for the Arizona Game and Fish Region IV office in Yuma. "At that rate, an estimated 37 bighorn sheep would have been lost to this lion in a year."

With a current average annual recruitment of only 44 bighorn sheep within the Kofa Mountains Complex Predation Management Area (including 39 on the Kofa National Wildlife Refuge), the impact of such heavy predation could have been devastating.

"As the agency responsible for the long-term sustainability of wildlife populations across the state, we have to use science-based data to make the best decisions possible," said Barber. "In this case, the data made a compelling case for action. Doing nothing would have likely resulted in further reduction of an already depressed bighorn sheep population and made recovery efforts even more difficult."

The department continues to work, in collaboration with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, on a comprehensive management approach to address the potential issues preventing recovery of the Kofa bighorn sheep population. This approach includes health and disease assessments of the sheep herd, evaluation of water distribution and availability, evaluating the impacts of human disturbance, and evaluating the impacts of mountain lion predation.

With other mountain lions remaining in the Kofa Mountains Complex Predation Management Area, Game and Fish biologists will continue to take an active role in monitoring bighorn sheep losses attributed to predation.

“The goal is not to remove all mountain lions from the management area, but to limit predation until the sheep population recovers,” said Barber. “Mountain lion populations throughout the state are healthy and they are neither rare, threatened or at risk. The same can’t be said for this bighorn sheep population.”

The Kofa bighorn sheep herd has played a critical role in restoring desert bighorn sheep populations into areas where they have been extirpated (no longer exist, but once did) in Arizona and throughout the southwestern U.S. Transplant efforts using the Kofa herd were suspended when the population began to decline earlier this decade.

Game and Fish will be conducting aerial population surveys throughout the region this October. Results are anticipated to be available in November.

“It’s going to take years for this herd to rebound,” Barber said. “But, it’s important we play an active role in the recovery.”

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working on an environmental assessment (EA) proposing management options for limiting mountain lion predation on bighorn sheep within the Kofa National Wildlife Refuge. The draft EA is open for public comment until Oct. 2 and can be viewed at www.fws.gov/southwest/refuges/arizona/kofa. The EA is not required for the Arizona Game and Fish Department to manage resident wildlife (including mountain lions and bighorn sheep) off the Refuge.

For history, facts, FAQ’s, research and more on the struggling Kofa bighorn sheep population, visit www.azgfd.gov/kofa.

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