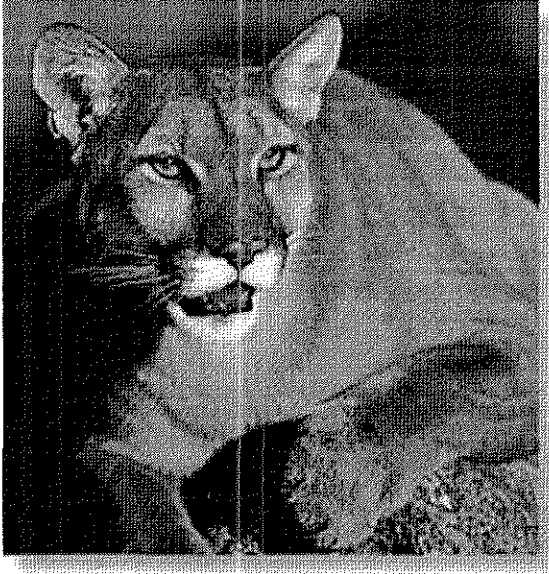


Department Promotes Flawed Cougar Killing Policy in Attempt to Protect Desert Bighorn Sheep



Beginning in October 1999, the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish plans to kill cougars living in four areas occupied by state endangered desert bighorn sheep. The desert bighorn sheep, arguably at risk in New Mexico, only number about 220 animals statewide. However, a predator killing campaign is not a viable solution to recovery of the sheep in New Mexico.

Department plans include killing cougars in four bighorn sheep areas, specifically the Ladron Mountains, the Manzano Mountains, the Peloncillo Mountains and the Hatchet Mountains. **A total of 34 cougars, per year, for five years would be killed by sport hunters and houndsmen and trappers enlisted or contracted by the Department.** The killing of these cougars will take place regardless of whether desert bighorn sheep predation by cougars has been documented.

PROBLEMS WITH THE PLAN:

- 1) Killing cougars will not result in the recovery of desert bighorn sheep in New Mexico. When resident cougars are killed in sheep habitat, other cougars are highly likely to move into and occupy the same area. These cougars may be transient and may be even more predisposed to killing sheep than the cougars who were killed.
- 2) Instead of focusing on persecution of predators, the Department should be focusing on an aggressive recovery plan for the desert bighorn sheep, including captive breeding and reintroduction, aggressive habitat improvement (including purchase of grazing allotments) and the translocation of "nuisance" mule deer (cougars' preferred prey) into cougar/bighorn sheep habitat.
- 3) Killing cougars does not address other more fundamental causes of the demise of sheep populations, such as the presence of scabies among sheep, the absence of mule deer, and the degradation of the habitat due to over-grazing. After a 10-year study of cougars in the San Andres Mountains, the prestigious Hornocker Wildlife Institute concluded that "Although cougars occasionally killed the state-endangered desert bighorn sheep, the density of adult cougars was inconsequential to sheep survival rates. The sheep population was limited by the combination of small population size and the high prevalence of disease (scabies) which made sheep more vulnerable to a variety of mortality causes, including cougar predation."
- 4) Even if killing cougars were a viable solution to restoring bighorn sheep populations, the Department will not know if their cougar killing has any relationship to changes in the sheep population, because they have no plans to monitor the cougar population while they are monitoring sheep populations. Therefore, any changes in sheep populations will not be able to be correlated to relative numbers of cougars, because the cougar population and population trend will be unknown.
- 5) California is facing a situation similar to New Mexico with their Sierra Nevada bighorn sheep, which is a state- and federally-listed species there. Instead of vainly attempting to restore the sheep by blaming predators in that state, California Game and Fish is focusing on recovery efforts for the sheep. They are developing a recovery program which includes captive breeding and habitat improvement, including the purchase of domestic sheep allotments.

WHAT TO DO:**URGENT-GAME COMMISSION TO ACT ON THIS ON FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 23**

1. Write to the Department of Game and Fish and let them know you don't approve of this plan which lacks scientific basis. (Use any or all of the above examples).

Write to: Barry Hale, Division of Wildlife, New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, The New Mexico Game Commission, P.O. Box 25112 Villagra Bldg., Santa Fe, N.M. 87504

E-mail at: BHale@state.nm.us

Fax at: 827-7915

2. Write each Commissioner and let them know you don't approve of the proposed plan to kill cougars to protect bighorn sheep for the above reasons.

The New Mexico Game Commission

P.O. Box 25112 Villagra Bldg.

Santa Fe, N.M. 87504

Dept Fax: 827-7915 (if you do not have access to a fax machine, click [here](#) to e-mail your letter and we will fax it for you)

Commissioners:

William (Bill) H. Brininstool, Chairman

Gail Jean Cramer

Stephen Doerr

Bud Hettinga

Georga A. Otega

Steve Padilla

Thank you!

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