

For Immediate Release**May 7, 1998****Contact:** Ken Goldman 202-682-9400 x221 (*Media*)Susan George 505-277-3197 (*Southwest*)**Defenders Files Complaint Against Federal Mountain Lion Slaughter In New Mexico**

Albuquerque, NM -- Defenders of Wildlife today announced that it has filed a complaint against the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Wildlife Services (formerly Animal Damage Control, or ADC) and other federal agencies to halt the continuing program of excessive mountain lion, or cougar, killing in New Mexico. The complaint, filed in federal district court, charges that ADC has violated provisions of the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA), and requests an immediate end to mountain lion slaughter in the state until a science-based program can be instituted.

"No matter what name they've given themselves now, 'Wildlife Services' continues its tradition of relentless assaults on this nation's natural predators," said Defenders of Wildlife President Rodger Schlickeisen. "Controlling problem animals is one thing, but hunting yet another species to the brink of local extirpation is quite another."

ADC has been operating an on-going program of mountain lion extermination in New Mexico since at least 1988. Specifically, the agency has been targeting a region in the southern part of the state known as GMU-30. This region contains the Guadalupe Mountain range portion of the Lincoln National Forest and parts of lands under the control of Carlsbad National Park.

New information developed by the prestigious Hornacker Institute - a leading large-cat institute - indicates that mountain lion populations in the state could be dangerously low. "There have been no reliable estimates of the number of cougars in New Mexico" a recent report by the Institute states. Yet, despite this lack of information, ADC continues a preventative program of cougar killing in New Mexico and the agency has omitted any mention of the Hornacker study in its environmental assessments on the killing programs in New Mexico.

ADC operates under a nationwide "programmatic" EIS and local environmental assessments (EA), such as the three EAs done for all of New Mexico, but none of these documents have scientifically analyzed their impacts on target species, such as the mountain lion, according to Defenders. Instead, ADC simply prepared an EA for each of its regions in New Mexico, without reference to the specific effects of mountain lion killings and without reference to the new and significant information developed by the Hornacker Institute on mountain lion populations in the state.

"ADC has traditionally ignored NEPA requirements for site-specific actions," said Sue George, State Counsel for Defenders of Wildlife. "This time they may be causing the irreparable loss of mountain lions in New Mexico. At a minimum, ADC needs to be held accountable to the very public that they claim they serve before they continue wide-spread killing of cougars in the state."

ADC has no implementing regulations for animal control actions, no public review process and no sunset provision requiring Congressional reauthorization as do most other federal programs.

In 1996, Defenders filed a rulemaking petition, seeking ADC to issue specific operating procedures. The agency declined. Instead, ADC relies on agency guidelines, which range from instructions on operating two-way radios to a

general statement that non-lethal methods should be used "where appropriate." ADC does not recognize the ecological importance of predators to a healthy ecosystem. This litigation seeks to require that cougar management be determined by science and broad public input.

Defenders of Wildlife joins Animal Protection of New Mexico in this lawsuit, and is represented by Grove Burnett of the Western Environmental Law Center in Taos, New Mexico. Defenders of Wildlife, a national nonprofit conservation group with more than 250,000 members and supporters nation-wide (more than 1000 reside in New Mexico), is dedicated to protecting plants and animals in their natural habitats. Recognized for its innovative strategies to protect predators such as the Mexican wolf, Defenders has criticized ADC in recent years for the agency's overall reluctance to incorporate conservation biology principles into its operations.

