

AZ Game & Fish mulls killing Kofa lion

Wildlife refuge moratorium has expired

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Arizona Game and Fish Department officials won't rule out shooting a sheep-gobbling mountain lion now that a moratorium on shooting lions in the Kofa National Wildlife Refuge has expired. "The mountain lion population in Arizona is neither threatened, endangered, or at risk. The Kofa desert bighorn sheep population is clearly at risk and deserving of intervention on its behalf," the department said in a statement, released late Friday.

But the department is being prodded by a state legislator from Tucson not to shoot any lions until the federal government finishes up an environmental study on the issue in early 2010. "This is what the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has requested and was the original intent of the moratorium," said Rep. Daniel Patterson, who works full time as Southwest representative of Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility.

The moratorium on shooting lions in the Kofa north of Yuma ended Friday — 15 months after Game and Fish instituted it in response to environmentalist protests against the state's earlier shooting of two mountain lions there. On Tuesday, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will publish in the Federal Register a draft of its plan for dealing with the protracted controversy about lions in the Kofa that are believed to be eating desert bighorn sheep. State officials say that the small Kofa lion population has contributed to a crash in sheep populations at a refuge formed 60 years ago to protect bighorns. But critics say the department has placed too much emphasis on lions and not enough emphasis on drought as a factor in reducing sheep populations. They also say if Arizona resumes killing lions, that could eliminate the area's much smaller lion population.

The department said Friday that it won't speculate on what it will do next, but officials confirmed they are keeping close watch on a particular lion known as KMO4. That lion, captured and radio-collared in February, has since killed 13 desert bighorn sheep, the department said in its statement. Ten of those killings have occurred since the Game and Fish Commission extended the moratorium on April 18. That's eight more than the commission said would be necessary to get KMO4 classified as an "offending lion," even with the moratorium. That classification allows an official shooting of this lion by Game and Fish even while the moratorium continued. On Friday afternoon, Game and Fish got word of a 14th kill by this lion, the department said.

On average, this mountain lion is killing a desert bighorn sheep every 10 days, at an annual rate of about 37 desert bighorn sheep per year, the department said. That compares with an annual recruitment of yearling sheep in the Kofa of 39 annually, the statement said. In addition, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said three to four other mountain lions are preying on the refuge's wildlife population, the department noted in its statement released Friday evening.

"In its efforts to restore the critical and unique Kofa bighorn sheep herd, the department will not rule out any valid and appropriate wildlife management technique," the statement said. But it added that under the moratorium terms, the department could have killed this lion as early as June 7, when he killed a desert bighorn lamb in the Little Horn Mountains, it said. No other lions have been captured or collared on the Kofa since the moratorium was extended, the department said. The offending-lion definition used in the Kofa was the most conservative such definition in any of the Western states' bighorn sheep plans at the time the Kofa definition was published in April 2007, the department said. "We are proceeding in a way that ensures the efforts to protect this bighorn sheep herd are done prudently and in accordance with the biology," the department said.

But it would be outrageous if Game and Fish kills a lion at the very least before the Game and Fish Commission discusses this question again at a public hearing at its Friday meeting, Patterson said. "I would be extremely upset both as a conservationist and as a state legislator if Game and Fish rushes to kill a lion," Patterson said. "That makes the discussion pointless. "One of the real issues is the ethical problem of collaring an animal and using the collar to track down and kill them," Patterson said. "The state should be a better partner with the Fish and Wildlife Service, by at least waiting until the service can complete their plan."

In April, the service said that its draft plan would call for killing lions known to have killed two bighorn sheep at any time when sheep populations dip below 600. The sheep population peaked at 811 in 2000, dropped to 600 in 2003 and 390 by 2006 but climbed back over 400 in 2007 and 2008. When sheep populations rise above 600, killing an "offending" lion would still be possible but more difficult, and would be ruled out if sheep populations return to 800.

On Friday, a service spokesman said he is hopeful that Game and Fish will not kill any more lions until the service releases its final plan and makes a decision on it. "We recognize the substantial impacts to sheep by one lion, and it's an Arizona Game and Fish Department decision to lift or keep the moratorium," said the service's Jose Viramontes. "But at this point we are hopeful . . . because we have been very good working partners in the management of bighorn sheep populations. We have no reason to think that working relationship will change."

In a letter to Patterson, Game and Fish Director Larry Voyles observed that the service had originally said it would finish its environmental analysis last October and said in April that the report would be finished by October 2009. Now, it's estimating a March 2010 completion date, Voyles said. But the real issue is that the state government will be making critical decisions on an issue affecting a national wildlife refuge, Patterson said in an interview. "Where are the feds on this thing?" he said. "Basically, the state is doing everything."

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