



News Release

Arizona Ecological Services

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**FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE TO EVALUATE EFFECTS
OF ISSUING ENDANGERED SPECIES PERMITS RESULTING FROM PIMA COUNTY'S
SONORAN DESERT CONSERVATION PLAN**

The Fish and Wildlife Service, in cooperation with Pima County, will prepare an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) on the effects of issuing a permit for the limited "taking" of threatened and endangered animals as a result of developing and implementing the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan. The EIS process, designed to provide a systematic, open, and public evaluation of the permit issuance options, will commence with two "scoping" meetings on October 4, 2000.

Under the Endangered Species Act it is normally illegal to take (harm, harass, pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture, or collect) threatened and endangered species. The Service may, under limited circumstances, issue permits to take federally listed and candidate species, incidental to and not the purpose of, otherwise lawful activities. Issuing such an incidental take permit to a non-federal entity requires the development of and commitment to a habitat conservation plan that minimizes and mitigates the effects of incidental take on federally listed species.

Since March 1999, County-lead technical teams have been developing information necessary for preparation of the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan, which will serve as a habitat conservation plan. The biological goal of the conservation plan is to ensure the long-term survival of the full spectrum of local plants and animals by maintaining or improving their habitats and the ecosystem functions necessary for their survival. The County anticipates establishing a preserve system that will conserve habitats in perpetuity, and committing to species research and monitoring.

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Once the plan is completed, the County will seek an incidental take permit from the Service. The Service must be prepared to determine whether or not the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan meets the requirements of the Endangered Species Act before issuing an incidental take permit. Preparation of the EIS will, in part, formalize the Service's review of the permit (an intra-Service section 7 consultation will also be conducted late in the process).

“Development and guaranteed implementation of an effective conservation plan will greatly assist in recovering the region's threatened and endangered species,” said David Harlow, Field Supervisor for the Fish and Wildlife Service in Phoenix. “A comprehensive, ecosystem-based approach to conserving the area's rare species is far more effective than the current project-by-project, development-by-development evaluations. It should also give local planners and developers greater economic certainty, while providing area residents with the opportunity to help determine how their communities will look in the future.”

In order to assure that all significant and relevant environmental concerns are addressed in the EIS, the County and Service invite written and oral suggestions from the public. Both meetings will be held on October 4, 2000, at the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum Gallery, 2021 North Kinney Road, Tucson, Arizona. The meetings will be held from 3:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m., and again from 6:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. Each scoping meeting will include a presentation on the process involved in issuing an incidental take statement, the purpose and need for the EIS, and the status of the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan.

Following the presentations, there will be an opportunity for questions and answers and for the public to contribute issues that they believe should be addressed in the EIS.

Written comments can be sent to Fish and Wildlife Service Field Supervisor, 2321 W. Royal Palm Road, Suite 103, Phoenix, Arizona 85021, through October 23, 2000. Preliminary environmental and socioeconomic documents to be utilized in the EIS process are available for public inspection at the Pima County Administrator's Office (130 W. Congress, 10th floor in Tucson) and website (<http://www.co.pima.az.us/cmo/sdcp/index.html>).

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 93-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System which encompasses more than 520 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 66 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.