NEWS RELEASE

SOUTHWEST CONDOR WORKING GROUP

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Contacts: Jeff Humphrey, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (602) 242-0210 x222
Bill Heinrich, The Peregrine Fund (208) 362-3716
Lynda Lambert, Arizona Game and Fish Department (602) 789-3203
Keith Day, Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (435) 865-6100
Scott Sticha, Bureau of Land Management (435) 688-3303
Maureen Oltrogge, Grand Canyon National Park (928) 638-7779

SOUTHWEST CALIFORNIA CONDOR PROGRAM REVIEW COMPLETED

Phoenix, Ariz. – A review of the condor reintroduction program in northern Arizona and southern Utah is complete and a team of wildlife officials, land managers and condor biologists are recommending that the reintroduction program continue with several improvements. This is the second five-year review of the program and focuses on the 2002-2006 period.

The California condor reintroduction project began with the release of six condors at the Vermilion Cliffs in Arizona in December 1996. A total of 93 condors have been released to the wild and five chicks were wild-hatched in northern Arizona by the end of 2006. Other program highlights over the past five years include:

- In 2001, a reintroduced condor produced the first confirmed condor egg laid in the wild since 1986. The egg was laid in a shallow cave in Grand Canyon National Park. In total, five condors have now hatched in the wild. Four are still alive.
- Implementation of a voluntary non-lead ammunition program in Arizona that has reduced available toxic lead bullet fragments by an estimated 50% on the Kaibab and Paria plateaus.
- Reduction of overall mortality from almost 40% for the first five-year reporting period to approximately 27% for this reporting period.
- Improvement of adaptive management in the field to more effectively address condor behavior issues.
- Virtual elimination of predation of newly released condors through improved field techniques.

The review recognizes that lead contamination is a major challenge facing the condor population in the Southwest. Numerous scientific studies have shown that shotgun pellets and rifle bullet fragments in animal carcasses are the primary source of this contamination.

Cooperative efforts are underway to remediate lead contamination in condors. The Arizona Game and Fish Department offers a free non-lead ammunition program, started in 2005, in an attempt to reduce lead exposure for wild condors. Hunters have responded positively to using non-lead ammunition in condor range, although expanded adoption of the effort is needed to further reduce lead exposure and mortality in condors.

The Peregrine Fund field team has amplified their response to the increased threat of lead exposure by trapping, testing, and treating all wild condors every year to reduce lead-related mortalities. Although field biologists have managed to reduce the number of condor deaths due to lead toxicity by pursuing a rigorous monitoring and treatment protocol, these efforts are highly invasive, labor intensive, and costly. In addition, the long-term sub-lethal effects of lead exposure in condors are unknown. Thus, it is unlikely that the northern Arizona and southern Utah condor program will succeed at achieving a self-sustaining condor population with the current lead exposure situation.

The condor reintroduction is being conducted as an experiment under a special Endangered Species Act rule. The experimental condor population is managed under reduced protections and regulations with the exception of birds within National Parks where they are afforded threatened species protection. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service evaluates the program every five years to determine whether the program should continue, how it can be improved, whether condors have been provided a reasonable opportunity for survival and not put at too great a risk due to either ecological factors or relaxed protections, and whether the Service and other agencies are complying with their various commitments.

The review was conducted as a joint effort between the Service, Arizona Game and Fish Department, Utah Division of Wildlife Resources, The Peregrine Fund and Bureau of Land Management, with input from numerous agencies, local governments, commenters and open house participants.

The full report, including recommendations, is available by calling the Service (602-242-0210) and on the Internet at http://www.fws.gov/southwest/es/arizona/.

Condors are scavenger birds that have soared over many parts of the United States since prehistoric times. Their numbers plummeted in the 20th century and in 1967 the condor was listed as an endangered species under a law predating the existing Endangered Species Act.

In the Southwest, condors have been observed to fly long distances, but they generally have remained within the greater Grand Canyon ecosystem. Recently, some members of the population have been making regular flights to the vicinity of Zion National Park and spending a portion of the year there.

The goal of the California Condor Recovery Plan is to establish two geographically separate, self-sustaining populations -- a primary population in California and the other outside of California, each with 150 birds and at least 15 breeding pairs.

The release of California condors in northern Arizona is a joint public/private partnership between The Peregrine Fund, the Service, Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, Arizona Game and Fish Department, Utah Division of Wildlife Resources, Coalition of Resources and Economies, The Phoenix Zoo, U.S. Forest Service, and other partners. The Peregrine Fund, a non-profit organization, is funding and conducting the releases and monitoring the condors. For information about the California condor program in Arizona, go to: www.peregrinefund.org, http://www.fws.gov/arizonaes/ or www.azgfd.gov/condor.

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NOTE TO EDITORS: Photographs and B-roll of the California condor are available by contacting Jeff Humphrey (602-242-0210 or jeff_humphrey@fws.gov) or visiting http://www.fws.gov/arizonaes/ and http://images.fws.gov/