



News Release

Southwest Region P.O. Box 1306 Albuquerque, NM 87103

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Contacts: Victoria Fox (505) 248-6455
Elizabeth Slown (505) 248-6455
John Morgart (520) 387-4989
John Hervert, Arizona Game and Fish
Department (520)342-0091

Draft Supplement and Amendment to the Sonoran Pronghorn Recovery Plan Available for Public Review

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is seeking public review and comment on amendments to the 1998 Final Revised Sonoran Pronghorn Recovery Plan. These changes are a court-ordered response to a lawsuit brought by the Defenders of Wildlife in Federal Court against the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and five other government agencies. On February 12, 2001 the Court ruled that the 1998 Recovery Plan 1) fails to establish criteria for delisting Sonoran pronghorn, and 2) fails to provide estimates of time necessary to carry out recovery actions necessary to achieve the Plan's goal. The Court remanded only these two portions of the 1998 Recovery Plan back to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for reconsideration. In response to the Court Order, the draft Supplement and Amendment applies specific recovery efforts to appropriate listing/delisting factors, and provides estimates of time necessary to carry out these efforts. The Service believes these recovery efforts will in the short-term lead to downlisting the Sonoran pronghorn from endangered to threatened, and in the long-term, will contribute to the delisting of the species.

Additional information on Sonoran pronghorn biology has been collected since the 1998 Recovery Plan was completed. In order to fully address the Court-ordered remands, the objectives of the Recovery Plan Supplement and Amendment are to: 1) ensure that the best and most current information available is used; 2) address the five listing/delisting factors required by the Endangered Species Act; 3) reassess recovery criteria presented in the 1998 Recovery Plan in relation to these five factors; and 4) provide estimates of time to carry out various recovery actions listed in the Recovery Plan. The five listing/delisting factors are: 1) the present or threatened destruction, modification, or curtailment of its habitat or range; 2) overutilization for commercial, sporting, scientific, or educational purposes; 3) disease or predation; 4) the inadequacy of existing regulatory mechanisms; and 5) other natural or manmade factors affecting its continued existence.

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The pronghorn is a species unique to western North America with a range that extends from southern Canada to northern Mexico. The fastest land mammal in North America, the pronghorn is a small-bodied, long-legged speedster of the open plains and deserts capable of sustained speeds of 40 miles per hour with short bursts up to 50 miles per hour. The Sonoran pronghorn is an endangered subspecies of pronghorn native to the hot, dry Sonoran Desert of southwest Arizona and northern Sonora, Mexico. Critically imperilled in both countries, the Sonoran pronghorn was first designated as endangered in the U.S. in 1967 under the Endangered Species Preservation Act of 1966, which was later affirmed by the Endangered Species Act of 1973.

Although probably never abundant, Sonoran pronghorn distribution and numbers have shrunk precipitously over the last one hundred years due to a combination of factors. Capable of long-range movements of 40 or more miles in response to unpredictable, widely-dispersed, and sporadic rainfall, conversion of habitat to other uses and barriers to movement caused by roads, canals, train tracks, and fences are the primary culprits in the decline of the Sonoran pronghorn. Other compounding and equally important causes include such things as overgrazing, diseases brought in with domestic livestock, and overhunting, particularly during the earlier half of the 20th Century.

Sonoran pronghorn may have once freely ranged over more than 35,000 square miles in the U.S. and Mexico. The currently occupied habitat is now thought to be less than 10% of its former size. The world population of Sonoran pronghorn was estimated at 445 animals in December 2000. These animals occur in two distinct subpopulations in Mexico and one in the U.S. with little or no interchange. The current estimate is that only 99 adult animals remain in the U.S. This number is down markedly from a population high of over 200 recorded in March 1994. A significant factor in the decline of this population is poor fawn survival with minimal or no fawn recruitment in five of the last seven years. Poor fawn survival is directly correlated with timing, duration, and distribution of critically important rainfall during the winter months and summer monsoon and its effects on plant growth. In addition, predator-caused high adult mortality and an aging population have also contributed significantly to their decline. Although Sonoran pronghorn biologists are encouraged by the number of fawns produced and still surviving in 2001, they consider this a short-term reprieve in a long-term decline.

Copies of the draft supplement and amendment to the 1998 Final Revised Sonoran Pronghorn Recovery Plan may be obtained from Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge at 1611 North Second Avenue, Ajo, Arizona, by calling the refuge at (520) 387-6483, via fax at 520-387-5359, or from the internet at: <http://arizonaes.fws.gov>. The public may mail or fax their comments to the refuge. The deadline for comments is November 24, 2001.

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 94-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System which encompasses more than 535 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 70 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.

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