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NEWS RELEASE For immediate release June 26, 2004

Frog species reintroduced in U.S. after more than 20 years
Arizona is host state for this rare type of frog

SANTA RITA MOUNTAINS, Ariz. — Tarahumara frogs are hopping free in the United States for the first time in more than two decades. Biologists released more than 400 of the frogs and tadpoles in the Santa Rita Mountains about 50 miles south of Tucson, Arizona, this weekend.

While populations of these frogs are still found in Mexico, biologists believe the last Tarahumara frogs in the U.S. died out in the early 1980s. Thousands of the frogs lived in Arizona's Santa Cruz County in the 1970s. Biologists believe they may have disappeared because of disease, winter cold, flooding, and/or toxic fallout from copper smelters.

"Returning these frogs to the wilds of Arizona is one milestone," says Arizona Game and Fish Department herpetologist Michael Sredl. "The real achievement will come when we establish reproducing populations of Tarahumara frogs in Arizona."

The released frogs were collected as eggs in Mexico in 2000. They were reared at U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service facilities, Kofa and San Bernardino National Wildlife Refuges, and the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum. The frogs and tadpoles were carried to the weekend release site in plastic containers in the backpacks of biologists and volunteers. The scientists are members of a conservation team that has tirelessly worked to reach this landmark.

"Planning, permitting, collecting, rearing, and releasing are complete," says Jim Rorabaugh, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service herpetologist, "but the success of this project relies on monitoring this population to determine whether the threats they faced in the past are still present, and if necessary, addressing them."

The released frogs were treated against a fungal disease that has been killing off frogs around the world since the Tarahumara frog died out in the U.S. years ago. Also, bullfrogs, which are predators of Arizona native frogs, have not been found in surveys of the release area.

The Tarahumara frog is a 2 ½- to 4 ½-inch greenish-brown frog with small brown and black spots on its body. It prefers deep plunge pools in the rugged canyons of southeastern Arizona.

Tom Skinner, a Forest Service biologist, says, "We feel fortunate to take part in this exciting project to bring back natives and enhance the biodiversity of the forest's ecosystems."

The Tarahumara frog release is part of a joint project involving the Arizona Game and Fish Department, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Forest Service, Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum, Phoenix Zoo, University of Arizona, and Instituto del Medio Ambiente y el Desarrollo Sustentable del Estado de Sonora. Several private citizens and biologists are also involved in reestablishing Tarahumara frogs in Arizona. The team has identified other potential release sites to help reestablish this frog.

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Note to media: Background information on the Tarahumara frog project is available at arizonaes.fws.gov/Tarahumara_Frog.htm. **Video and still photos of the frog release will be available through the Arizona Game and Fish Department.** Call public information officer Debbie Freeman at (602) 789-3215. Tarahumara is pronounced Tah-rah-hue-mah-rah.