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## Concerns over historic Kofa bighorn sheep herd elevated

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By

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PHOENIX — Biologists recently presented the Arizona Game and Fish Commission with compelling data indicating that recovering the critically important Kofa desert bighorn sheep herd from near record-low population levels will be challenging due to additive mountain lion predation.



Game and Fish Department biologists informed the commission at its Aug. 7 meeting that the monitoring of one radio-collared mountain lion revealed it had killed 14 bighorn sheep since February, an average of one bighorn sheep about every 10 days. At this rate, this one lion is on pace to kill an estimated 37 bighorn sheep annually.

By comparison, the estimated annual yearling recruitment from the Kofa National Wildlife Refuge bighorn sheep herd is only 39 animals.

Additionally, biologists reported last week that the same radio-collared lion has made a 15th kill. The animal killed was a bighorn lamb within the Kofa Predation Management Area near the Little Horn Mountains.

"The rate at which this lion is preying on bighorn sheep is of grave concern," said Game and Fish Yuma Regional Supervisor Pat Barber.

Eleven of the bighorn sheep killed were within the department's Kofa Mountains Complex Predation Management Area. This management area includes all of the Kofa National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) and three key areas that extend slightly beyond the refuge to encompass contiguous mountain ranges not captured by the Refuge boundaries. These areas contain habitats used by Kofa NWR bighorn sheep population.

Barber added, "The Kofa NWR bighorn sheep population provides 76 percent of all bighorn sheep recruitment in a greater isolated metapopulation in southwestern Arizona and is a critical core in sheep restoration for Arizona and the southwestern U.S."

This isolated metapopulation is comprised of several smaller subpopulations between Interstates 8 and 10 and State Routes 85 and 95. Due to human development, fragmentation, and changes in landscapes active management is required.

Although managers are working to address several issues that might limit sheep recovery, such as water availability, disease and human disturbance, predation at this level remains a significant concern.