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## Deaths of five endangered bighorn sheep concern scientists

*Associated Press*

(08-12) 11:17 PDT Palm Desert, Calif. (AP) -- The sudden deaths of five endangered Peninsular bighorn sheep have scientists concerned there might be a major die-off that could wipe out the fragile, rebounding population.

Some of the sheep appeared healthy just days before they died in the past two weeks. At least two died from bacterial pneumonia — cause of the last major die-off of Peninsular bighorn sheep — and the cause of the other three deaths hasn't been determined.

Compounding fears that a die-off looms is the disappearance and presumed death of all but six of 25 lambs born this year in the northern Santa Rosa Mountains.

The sheep, who numbered around 1,200 in the 1970s declined to about 280 by 1996. They rebounded after they were designated an endangered species in 1998 and their numbers are now up to about 700.

"You don't usually have healthy-looking animals fall over. The big crisis is that five have fallen over dead," said Jim DeForge, director of the nonprofit Bighorn Institute research organization.

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

spokeswoman Jane Hendron said there is concern about the Peninsular deaths: "But at the same time we don't want to speculate or jump to any conclusions about whether these are isolated deaths or part of a bigger trend."

Peninsular bighorn sheep roam the desert mountain slopes, canyons and washes from the Palm Springs area south into Baja California. Their lifespan is 12 to 14 years.

The five carcasses were discovered in the San Jacinto and northern Santa Rosa Mountains above the Coachella Valley by institute researchers, who use radio collars to monitor about 30 of the wild sheep. Four of the dead wore collars.

The first death was noticed July 28 and the most recent was found Tuesday.

"It's a cause of extreme concern, because the animal hasn't reached recovery levels," local Sierra Club chapter conservation chair Joan Taylor told The Press-Enterprise.

Peninsulars are among five races of bighorn sheep found in the United States. Three kinds live in California and Peninsular and Nelson bighorns are usually referred to as desert bighorns, the institute said.

Nelsons populate the San Gabriel and San Bernardino mountains, along with the deserts of San Bernardino and

Riverside counties, but don't mix with southern range Peninsulars.

Information from: The Press-Enterprise,

[www.pe.com](http://www.pe.com)