

Jaguar recovery efforts lack support from federal agency

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By [Staci Matlock](#) | The New Mexican
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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has decided not to write a recovery plan for the endangered jaguar, a move critics say is related to a planned fence along the U.S.-Mexico border and a lawsuit filed against the agency.

Michael Robinson, conservation advocate for the Center for Biological Diversity, says the agency is abdicating its responsibility to protect and restore the species in the U.S.

The jaguar was added to the U.S. Endangered Species list in 1997. A few of the big cats have been spotted in Southern New Mexico, part of their historic range, since the 1990s. A few hundred jaguars survive from South America north to the state of Sonora in Mexico, near New Mexico.

Benjamin Tuggle, regional director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Albuquerque, said in a Dec. 21 memo to the agency's director, H. Dale Hall, that "development of a formal recovery plan at this time would not promote the conservation of the jaguar."

While four male jaguars have been documented in the U.S. border region, the latest last year, no females have been confirmed there since 1963, indicating that "the United States does not support a separate breeding population" for the cat, Tuggle said.

Tuggle said a recovery plan is unlikely to help the jaguar. Hall signed the recommendation Jan. 7.

Historically, the jaguar roamed from Southern California across the lower portion of the southern United States to Louisiana. The U.S. and Mexico are working to establish a northern jaguar sanctuary in Sonora.

The Center for Biological Diversity sued the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in September in federal District Court in Phoenix, claiming it should establish critical habitat and a recovery plan for jaguars. Robinson said the agency is using a narrow exemption under the Endangered Species Act to avoid writing a recovery plan. "Because there's a lawsuit they are going to lose, they are trying to shore up their position," he said.

Last June, more than 500 members of the American Society of Mammalogists met in Albuquerque and unanimously passed a resolution calling on the Fish and Wildlife Service to develop a recovery plan for the jaguar, according to University of New Mexico biologist Joe Cook. The resolution concluded: "Habitats for the jaguar in the United States, including Arizona and New Mexico, are vital to the long-term resilience and survival of the species, especially in response to ongoing climate change."

Since 1997, the federal agency has found that jaguars disappeared in New Mexico and Arizona mainly because of hunting, not for habitat-related reasons.

A multiagency Jaguar Conservation Team was established for Arizona and New Mexico in 1996, but Robinson said the team "has not lived up to its pledges. They pledged to conserve jaguar habitat. They have not conserved a single acre of jaguar habitat. They have not specified recovery criteria."

Elizabeth Slown, a spokeswoman for the Fish and Wildlife Service in Albuquerque, disagreed, saying the team has a conservation assessment and strategy. "A U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recovery plan would be redundant," she said.

A recovery plan costs about \$250,000, Slown said. "That money can be better used to help other endangered species or support other jaguar projects," she said.

The agency has doled out U.S. funds to help jaguar projects in Argentina and Mexico, including \$37,000 to the Defenders of Wildlife to install remote cameras and pay private ranchers in Sonora to manage them and to protect the big cats.

Robinson said his organization also believes the recovery plan was ditched so it would not interfere with federal plans for a fence along the U.S.-Mexico border.

Jim Stuart, a nongame and endangered species specialist with the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, said the Jaguar Conservation Team, of which he is a member, is concerned about the border fence as well. "If a virtual fencing is used, with detection methods like cameras, the impact to jaguars moving either way would be minimal," Stuart said. "If it means building an 8- to 10-foot metal fence to exclude humans, it will exclude jaguars as well."

For information on the Northern Jaguar Sanctuary, see www.northernjaguarproject.org. For information on the Jaguar Conservation Team, see www.azgfd.gov/w_c/es/jaguar_management.shtml.

Contact [Staci Matlock](mailto:smatlock@sfnewmexican.com) at 470-9843 or smatlock@sfnewmexican.com.