Fights over endangered species are nothing new in New Mexico. But one over the officially endangered jaguar — the Americas’ biggest big cat — now that’s new.

Over the last several days next door in Arizona, a drama has played out over a jaguar dubbed Macho B.

Environmentalists are demanding an investigation into the Arizona Game and Fish Department’s decision to put the big cat down last month — a demand bolstered by a story in yesterday’s Los Angeles Times that quotes the University of Arizona veterinary diagnostic laboratory pathologist who conducted the necropsy.

Arizona officials had said the approximately 15-year-old Macho B had terminal kidney failure, but that’s not what Sharon Dial told the L.A. Times:

“Nothing is absolute,” Dial said. “There is nothing to say that he absolutely would have recovered, but I can say by looking at the kidneys that there is no structural reason why he would not have.

“I’ve looked at a lot of cat kidneys, not jaguar kidneys,” Dial added. “For a supposed 15-year-old cat, he had damned good-looking kidneys.”

In turn, Arizona officials blasted Dial’s comments as “outrageous, unprofessional and speculative.”

Macho B was known to Arizona Game and Fish officials for years from the recordings of trail cameras used to conduct research south of Tuscon. There have only been a few reports of jaguars venturing into southeastern
Arizona and southwestern New Mexico over the past several decades. In fact, Macho B may have been the only jaguar to venture this far north in recent times.

On a Web site devoted to the saga of Macho B, Arizona Game and Fish Department officials have said they opted to put Macho B down to “end his suffering.”

Macho B leaves the capture site after collaring in February (Photo by Arizona Game and Fish Department)

Macho B was captured on Feb. 18 south of Tuscon by accident — in the course of a black bear and mountain lion research study. The rarest of “incidental” captures, the animal was then fitted with a satellite tracking collar and released. As you might imagine, such captures can prove to be awfully stressful on the animal. And in fact, subsequent monitoring seemed to indicate Macho B wasn’t well. So the Arizona officials decided to recapture the animal and send it to the Phoenix Zoo for more tests. The state agency concluded the following:

Through blood tests and physical exam, zoo veterinarians found the cat was suffering from severe and unrecoverable kidney failure.

I imagine that initial conclusion will be heavily scrutinized in the days and weeks to come.

Meanwhile, the Center for Biological Diversity — no stranger to New Mexico’s endangered species wars — is calling for a federal investigation. Due to the fact that it was state officials who decided to recapture and then euthanize the jaguar, the center argues that Arizona officials shouldn’t be allowed to investigate themselves.

The center further argues that the feds need to come up with a plan to “start the long, hard work of restoring the U.S. jaguar population.”

That’s from a news release sent out by the center March 31 — and it’s a line that makes me wonder.

While it’s true that a federal judge ruled on Tuesday (pdf) that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service under the Bush administration was wrong to refuse to develop a recovery plan for jaguars, I can only imagine how contentious such a plan might be.
Think about it this way: If southern New Mexico ranchers are up in arms about the presence of critically endangered Mexican gray wolves freely roaming the land — animals about the size of a medium-sized dog — how will they react to the news a predator that can grow as large as 350 pounds might be coming next?

The Center for Biological Diversity points out that the historic range of the jaguar “stretched from San Francisco Bay to the Appalachians,” even though most probably think of jaguars as the majestic tree-scaling big cats of Mexico and Central and South America. Not the United States of America.

Jaguars have a special place in ancient Mexican history, in which both the Maya and Aztecs venerated the animal as a symbol of regal authority and raw power.

The unfortunate Macho B may well remain a symbol of government power — the power to capture and kill, and maybe, the power to also bring the species back.