

Wildlife group threatens suit against feds to protect jaguar

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A wildlife group is gearing up for a fight to force the federal government to better protect jaguars, although the big cats have virtually disappeared from the country.

The Center for Biological Diversity wants the Wildlife Services division of the U.S. Department of Agriculture to stop the trapping, snaring and poisoning of nuisance predators that could result in the killing or endangering of jaguars and ocelots in the Southwest. Spokesman Michael Robinson said the group is concerned about anti-predator efforts in Arizona, New Mexico and possibly Texas.

"They're not targeting jaguars, but if they're setting up a snare for a mountain lion, there's a chance a jaguar could end up in that snare," he said.

A lawsuit could come as soon as mid-July. At the end of April, the conservation group gave the government 60 days' notice of its intent to sue. William Clay, Wildlife Services' deputy administrator, replied on May 14, saying Wildlife Services had "reviewed your comments and will take them into consideration."

The lawsuit threat comes in the wake of the death of a jaguar in Arizona. The animal, known as Macho B, was caught in southern Arizona in February 2009 during a state Game and Fish Department effort to capture and track mountain lions and bears.

A tracking collar was placed on Macho B, but he was recaptured less than two weeks later after those monitoring him thought his behavior was unusual. He was diagnosed with a kidney ailment and euthanized.



A hidden Game and Fish Department camera shows the late Macho B in his natural environment in Southern Arizona. There may be more Macho B's out there in the wild. His kind should be protected. (Arizona Game and Fish Department)

Game and Fish believed it was an inadvertent capture. However, Emil McCain of Patagonia recently pleaded guilty in U.S. District Court in Tucson to unlawfully luring Macho B into a snare with jaguar scat.

McCain previously had been a subcontractor for a guide service hired by Game and Fish to help with research, said Bob Miles, an agency spokesman. Miles emphasized the man was never a Game and Fish employee.

Robinson said the center's anticipated lawsuit was not strictly motivated by the Macho B episode, though the "tragic fate of Macho B is certainly a factor." The lawsuit notice alleges that Wildlife Services and the federal Fish and Wildlife Service have failed to consult on activities that would affect

both the jaguar and the ocelot.

It also argues that a more than 10-year-old biological opinion on how jaguars can be affected by predator-control programs is outdated and that new scientific information shows that they need better protection.

The conservation group has a separate lawsuit pending against Game and Fish in the Macho B case. It alleges that the agency did not have the valid permit allowing it to inadvertently capture a jaguar in the bear and mountain-lion study.

The agency disagrees, Miles said. He declined to discuss the case further but said the agency cares a great deal about jaguar conservation.