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# U.S. Fish and Wildlife: Mexico should lead jaguar recovery

BY SCOTT TURNER / JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

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A federal plan to help grow the population of the endangered jaguar in the Southwest is drawing criticism from environmental groups. Only seven or possibly jaguars have been seen in the U.S. since 1996. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on Wednesday released its final draft of a recovery plan for the jaguar. (Arizona Republic)

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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Jaguar Recovery Plan would commit more than \$605 million to the species survival over the next 50 years, but leave much of the effort to Mexico.

It also includes few gaps for the large cats to cross the border. And that isn't sitting well with some wildlife advocates.

"This so-called recovery plan won't do anything to help the jaguar, so the threats to its survival and recovery will still require urgent action," said Michael Robinson, a senior conservation advocate at the Center for Biological Diversity. "The plan is a green light for Trump to build his wildlife-blocking border wall. Jaguars can't use Google maps to find tiny gaps in hundreds of miles of impermeable walls."

Among the reasons for much of the recovery work depending on Mexican wildlife officials is because few – if any – of the jaguars live on this side of the border, according to the recovery plan released by Fish and Wildlife on Wednesday.

According to the recovery plan, seven or possibly eight jaguars have been documented in the U.S. between 1996 to 2017. Male jaguars have been sighted in the Peloncillo Mountains and in the northern part of the San Luis Mountains in New Mexico's Hidalgo County.

"Currently in the U.S., we are aware of one male jaguar," USFWS public affairs specialist Aislinn Maestas said.

"Given that the jaguar is an international species with the vast majority of its range outside of the U.S., primary actions to recover the jaguar will occur outside of the U.S. In the Northwestern Recovery Unit Mexico will be the primary contributor to recovery for the jaguar because over 95% of the species' suitable habitat in the NRU (Northern Recovery Unit) exists within the borders of Mexico," the recovery plan states.

But Robinson says while the plan outlines measures Mexican authorities can take to protect the jaguars, “they won’t be enough to recover these majestic animals.”

“Without reintroduction in the Southwest and cross-border connectivity, isolation and genetic problems may doom the jaguars in northern Mexico,” Robinson said.

Maestas said the USFWS has long-term relationships with many partners in Mexico and in 2010 convened the binational Jaguar Recovery Team to facilitate a coordinated effort toward jaguar recovery. She said the team includes “jaguar experts and landowners-land managers from Mexico to help inform the needs of the jaguar within the Northwestern Recovery Unit and develop recovery actions to address threats.”

The Mexican National Jaguar Census estimated in 2011 there are 271 jaguars in bordering Sonora province. But Robinson said there could be as few as 50, another reason he feels the species should be reintroduced on this side of the border.

Robinson is also skeptical Sonora has enough habitat to support 1,161 jaguars as the plan claims. He cited a previous estimate that the habitat could only support 172.

He said jaguars are native to the U.S. and eventually migrated into Central and South America.

“I think the best habitat would be the Gila (National Forest),” Robinson said.

The plan lists a habitat area for six jaguars in Pima, Santa Cruz and Cochise counties in Arizona and Hidalgo County in New Mexico. But Maestas said the recovery team has not prescribed jaguar reintroductions in the United States, but focuses on efforts to sustain habitat, eliminate poaching, maintain at least two borderland dispersal corridors and improve human social acceptance of the jaguar to accommodate jaguars that disperse into the United States.

Jaguars are currently found in 19 countries, stretching from the United States to South America. The recovery plan calls for one habitat area from western Mexico into southern Arizona and southwest New Mexico. The other would stretch from eastern Mexico to northern Argentina.