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Plan developed for endangered South Texas cat

BY CHRISTOPHER SHERMAN : JANUARY 12, 2014

McALLEN, Texas (AP) — The federal government has established a recovery plan for the jaguarundi, nearly four decades since the small wildcat was listed as an endangered species and nearly three decades since one was confirmed in the U.S.

But don't expect to see the reddish brown or grey feline returning to what remains of the thick brush in South Texas anytime soon. The plan recently approved by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is heavy on additional research and habitat restoration but is not especially optimistic about its prospects for success.

The jaguarundi, a bit bigger than the average house cat, had much of its preferred thorn scrub habitat cleared long ago in Texas for agriculture and more recently for development in the rapidly growing border region. The cats still prowl in northeast Mexico, where much of the research would take place.

"There's just not a whole lot of information on the jaguarundi," said Taylor Jones of the nonprofit WildEarth Guardians, which sued and reached a settlement with the government that called for the recovery plan. She hopes the plan will spark new research, and in the near term contribute to additional efforts to conserve and restore the cat's habitat. "You certainly couldn't bring them back if they didn't have any place to live."

The federal wildlife agency expects the recovery will require decades of research and planning and have to overcome some major obstacles, including not having any known jaguarundi populations left in the U.S. and little information of the status of the species in Mexico.

The recovery plan notes that the nearest population of jaguarundis is 95 miles south of the Texas border, but it's unlikely enough connected habitat exists for the cat to return to the U.S. Even if the habitat was restored, it's possible the felines would not be motivated to move north.

That would leave researchers with the complicated and difficult option of moving a jaguarundi population from Mexico to the U.S.

"I don't think anyone's even sure if jaguarundis would take well to being reintroduced," Jones said.

"Re-introduction is pretty hard on the animals. It's often a last-ditch method when there's really no other way to get them re-established."

It's not clear how many jaguarundis existed when the species was first listed as endangered in 1976, but it was determined they were in decline due to habitat destruction. The last confirmed sighting of a jaguarundi in the U.S. was a dead one on a road outside Brownsville in South Texas in 1986. Before that, the last was seen in 1969.

Lesli Gray, a spokeswoman for the federal wildlife agency, said there is no guarantee funding will exist to meet the agency's goals, but at least a plan has been developed that outlines what is needed to delist the species or at least improve its population.

The recovery plan calls for collecting all that's known about the jaguarundi and its range, doing additional research and outlining the steps needed for its conservation. The agency would likely have to partner with other government entities and work with scientists in Mexico.

The plan calls for spending more than \$7 million in each of the first two years. Under a fully funded plan the jaguarundi could be downlisted by 2040 if three or more established populations are found with a total of at least 250 cats. The species could be delisted 10 years later.

For years, the jaguarundi has been a second thought in terms of conservation efforts, pushed to the appendices by the larger and spotted ocelot. The ocelot is also endangered and similarly inhabits the dense thorn scrub that covered much of this part of Texas and northeast Mexico. But unlike the jaguarundi, it still has a small breeding population in South Texas.

State, federal and private groups have worked in recent years to expand a string of wildlife refuges and establish corridors that could connect them. The plan noted that while the jaguarundi hasn't been the focus of conservation efforts, it would have likely benefited from efforts aimed at the ocelot, which inhabits similar habitat.