Catalina Bighorn Sheep Reintroduction Project
April 14 – April 27, 2014

BRIEFING

The following is a summary of Catalina Bighorn Sheep Reintroduction activities on the Coronado National Forest. This project status update covers the period from April 14 to April 27, 2014. For project background and previously-reported information on project events, please see the earlier project status updates available at www.azgfd.gov/catalinabighorn.

Additional project information can be obtained by visiting the Arizona Game and Fish Department Facebook page at https://www.facebook.com/azgafd#!/CatalinaBighorns, the Arizona Game and Fish Department webpage at http://www.azgfd.gov/catalinabighorn, the Arizona Desert Bighorn Sheep Society webpage at http;//www.adbss.org or by visiting the Catalina Bighorn Advisory Committee webpage at http://www.catalinabighornrestoration.org/. This update is a public document and information in it can be used for any purpose.

TO SUBSCRIBE

If you would like to receive project updates as they are published please send your email address to jsacco@azgfd.gov.

CURRENT POPULATION STATUS

No mortalities occurred during this reporting period. The original release of 31 sheep consisted of 21 adult females or ewes, three yearling/juvenile ewes, five adult males or rams, and two yearling/juvenile rams. Thirty of the released sheep were outfitted with satellite GPS collars to provide managers with up-to-date information to help make adaptive, data-driven decisions. As of April 27, 2014, 13 of the remaining 14 collared sheep are known to be alive; one of the collars maybe malfunctioning.

To date there have been 16 bighorn sheep mortalities. Fourteen of the sheep were killed by mountain lions, one died as the result of predation by an unidentified cat such as a small mountain lion or a bobcat, and another died from myopathy. To date, three lions associated with bighorn sheep kills have been removed, and the most recent of these lions was believed to have killed multiple sheep.

LAMBS

Biologists continue to monitor the population for new additions and to check on the already born lambs. To date five lambs have been observed during this season. As the lambing season draws to a close it is encouraging to note that the survivability of the known lambs has exceeded expectations. This is a source of cautious optimism. Because females with new lambs are especially sensitive to disturbance, there are trail restrictions in place inside the Bighorn Sheep Management Area to minimize any negative

impacts from human disturbance on the sheep. Both trailhead notices and volunteers on the trail have been reminding hikers of the potential adverse impacts to the sheep caused by dogs or by people hiking more than 400 feet off-trail within the bighorn sheep recovery area during lambing season. For additional information, please visit the U.S. Forest Service webpage at www.fs.usda.gov/coronado/.

COMMUNICATION AND COORDINATION

The next written briefing will be provided on May 16, 2014.

CONTACT

Mark Hart is the Public Information Officer for this project and can be reached at (520) 628-5376.

RESEARCH PROJECT FIELD NOTES

Research biologists have been compiling location data on all Catalina sheep and constructing databases to house the data. We have also been fine-tuning sampling strategies to take habitat measurements in locations used by sheep and in randomly selected locations across the area occupied by sheep. These data will help to characterize the attributes of vegetation structure, density and composition where sheep are found, and together with variables like topography (e.g., slope and ruggedness) and sheep group composition, will help define what factors place a sheep at risk of mortality. As well, we continue to monitor both individuals and small bands of sheep to observe and document ewes with lambs and observe the changes in group dynamics, sheep movements and behaviors.

OTHER REMARKS

Fire Management on the Coronado National Forest approaches each fire ignition on the landscape as an opportunity to safely achieve land management objectives, with the least firefighter exposure necessary. The successful management of fire on the landscape is an aspect of land management with many factors to consider. In addition to firefighter safety and public safety, the Forest Service also consider the effects of smoke to our neighboring communities, and the overall effect of expected fire behavior on the landscape. The Forest Service seeks opportunities to create and maintain resilient landscapes, fire-adapted communities, and provide a safe and efficient response to wildfires. As protectors of the land, and servants of the people, they evaluate risks with a broad perspective for both planned and unplanned ignitions.

Fire managers work to allow fire to play its natural role in the ecosystem, weighing strategic and tactical decisions against the probability of success in meeting reasonable objectives. Fire management in the Pusch Ridge Wilderness is no exception. Steep, broken terrain, indicative of good sheep habitat, makes firefighter safety, access and egress, and feasibility of fire management a concern. Human development in the wildland urban interface, also presents greater risks when managing fire. For these reasons Coronado National Forest managers seek opportunities to manage fire starts in Pusch Ridge Wilderness by safely achieving landscape objectives with the least firefighter exposure necessary, while enhancing stakeholder support for our management efforts.

Managing natural fire ignitions in the Catalina Mountains is one way to reduce fuel loads and help improve vegetation management. Each year there are hundreds of lightning strikes in the Catalina

Mountains during the monsoon season. A very small percentage of these strikes start a fire. Many of these lightning ignited fires go out naturally as a result of rainfall and high humidity. The Catalina Mountains are characterized as steep and rugged, with rocky ridges and sparse vegetation breaking up the fuel continuity. In the Pusch Ridge Wilderness area there have been two substantial lightning caused wildfires in the past 9 years. Both the Cottonwood Fire, approximately 350 acres in size and occurring in June 2005; and, the Romero Fire, approximately 880 acres in size and occurring in May 2006, started during peak fire season conditions. These fires burned substantial amounts of vegetation before being suppressed due to their potential to threaten nearby communities, such as Oro Valley and Summerhaven.

In contrast, from 2005 to 2009, 36% of the natural ignitions on the Santa Catalina Ranger District were not actively suppressed. An excellent example of a resource benefit fire in the Pusch Ridge Wilderness during this timeframe was the 4852- acre Guthrie Fire that occurred July 11- August 10, 2009. Because there was less of a threat to values at risk, the Guthrie Fire was managed and not suppressed after its detection. This helped to reduce high fuel loading conditions in the Pusch Ridge Wilderness.

Lastly, prescribed fire is another tool available to achieve land management objectives on the landscape. These types of fires are intentionally set under prescribed conditions. Prescribed fires are used to address specific management objectives. Typical objectives include the reduction of fuels in order to maintain forest health and reduce the risk of loss due to wildfire. Some roadblocks to implementing prescribed burns are the ability to achieve resource objectives without compromising firefighter and public safety, limited funding availability, competition with priority fuels work to decrease the risk to private property and infrastructure, competition for resources, complexity, and the potential to successfully achieve objectives.

In all that the Forest Service does, they aspire to successfully manage fire on the landscape, while considering land management objectives, the Forest Service mission, and the Federal Fire Policy. This can only be met by considering safety, ecological restoration, and our communities and stakeholders support for our management efforts.