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ABOVE: A ram is weighed by members of the desert bighorn relocation team. BELOW: A pair of bighorn ewes are brought to the relocation team before being taken to an area in the Bootheel.

OFF THE LIST

Recovery Of Desert Bighorn Sheep A Success Story

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LORDSBURG — The rapid, heaving breaths of hog-tied desert bighorn sheep sounded out their fear.

They had been captured from a fenced refuge so they could be released to the wild.

But if the sheep were stressed during the short time they were weighed, tagged and collared by wildlife officials,

the species as a whole is enjoying better days.

On Thursday, the state Game Commission marked the sheep's recovery from its near-disappearance in New Mexico 60 years ago by removing desert bighorns from the state list of threatened and endangered species.

The move marked the first time a species has recovered in sufficient numbers to be removed from the state's list.

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"Usually, when it (an animal) comes off the endangered species list, it's because it's extinct," said Eric Rominger, one of two bighorn sheep biologists in the Game and Fish Department, along with Elise Goldstein. "It's quite a success story."

The recovery effort marked another first recently when desert bighorns from one wild-roaming herd were relocated to another part of the state in the ongoing effort to establish robust populations in various locations around New Mexico. Previously, sheep put into the wild in New Mexico came from captive facilities.

Last Monday, 16 desert bighorns were caught in the Fra Cristobal Mountains on Ted Turner's Armendaris Ranch east of the Rio Grande in Sierra County, and moved to two mountain ranges in the state's Bootheel. Eleven ewes, all confirmed to be pregnant, were moved to the Peloncillo Mountains in southeastern Hidalgo County, and five sheep were released to the Big Hatchet Mountains. "It's really exciting," Goldstein said. "That we have a herd that's large enough to do that is awesome."

The Game and Fish Department's threshold for delisting the desert bighorn, a close cousin of the more common Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep, was set at a minimum of 500 wild sheep in at least three geographically distinct populations of at least 100 each.

There are about 650 desert bighorns roaming free across six mountain ranges in southern New Mexico today, not including about 70 in the Red Rock Wildlife Management Area that Game and Fish oversees north of Lordsburg. The fenced facility was established in 1972.

Bighorn rebound

Desert bighorns were put on the endangered species list in 1980 when wild herds dwindled to an estimated 69 sheep.

Thousands of desert bighorns, as many as 14,000, roamed more than a dozen arid mountain ranges in central and southern New Mexico before European settlement.



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A ram is lowered by helicopter to a waiting relocation team.

But hunting and diseases introduced by domestic sheep, which numbered in the millions in New Mexico by the 1880s, caused the population of desert bighorns to plummet.

Desert bighorn hunting was banned in 1889, and refuges were established in the 1920s, but, by 1946, herds remained in only two ranges — the San Andres and Hatchets, according to Game and Fish.

Until sheep were relocated from the free-roaming herd on Turner's Armendaris Ranch, sheep added to the wild in New Mexico came from either Red

Rock or the Kofa National Wildlife Refuge in Arizona.

Between 1979 and 2001, 249 desert bighorns were transplanted to the wild. From monitoring radio-collared bighorns in the 1990s, biologists concluded that about 85 percent of mortalities, for which the cause could be determined, were due to mountain lion predation.

In 2001, when the sheep population fell to fewer than 170, the state approved a program to provide greater protection to bighorns by removing mountain lions from ranges where

Recovery Leads To Delisting



Three desert bighorn ewes, tagged and collared, wait in a trailer before being relocated.



Ryan Walker of the state Department of Game and Fish cradles a desert bighorn sheep as Elise Goldstein, a bighorn sheep biologist, draws a blood sample as sheep are prepared for relocation.

sheep roamed. The mortality rate from lion predation fell 80 percent, and the statewide sheep population rose.

In 2008, the Game Commission changed the desert bighorn's status from endangered to threatened.

Under an exemption, the state has allowed one desert bighorn ram to be hunted each year, by public draw, from a herd in the Peloncillos. In addition, the Wild Sheep Foundation, on behalf of the state, has held an annual auction and a raffle for the opportunity to hunt either a Rocky Mountain or desert bighorn sheep since 1990.

With delisting, between eight and 12 licenses to hunt desert bighorns are expected to become available in the 2012-13 seasons, a decision to be made by the agency direc-

tor and the commission chairman. Around 16,000 desert bighorns are scattered across seven Western states, and more than 4,000 others are in Mexico, Rominger said.

Transplant process

After the 16 sheep were relocated last Monday from Turner's Armendaris Ranch to the state's Bootheel, Game and Fish conducted another transfer, this one involving captive sheep at Red Rock, on Wednesday and Thursday.

A group of two dozen people, including employees of Game and Fish and the Bureau of Land Management, New Mexico State University students and other volunteers, gathered at Red Rock to process the first of several dozen sheep destined to be moved.

A private helicopter crew

contracted by the state captured the bighorns, one by one, with a weighted net fired from a gun. One member of the three-man crew, known as a mugger, hopped from the helicopter to wrestle the netted sheep to the ground, binding its four legs with a leather belt, and slipping a blindfold over its head. Each sheep was then placed in a bag and hauled, dangling from a line below the helicopter, to a site for processing.

At Red Rock's processing site, the Game and Fish-led crew whisked each sheep to a scale for weighing and then to a shaded area where members of the team, speaking quietly to reduce the animal's stress, administered shots, drew blood, tagged ears and fixed color-coded radio collars around their necks.

During processing, team members doused each sheep with cool water to lower its body temperature and reduce the ill effects of stress. Their powerful legs tied up, the sheep were unable to employ their main means of survival—fleeing up steep mountain slopes.

"This is probably the scariest thing they've ever experienced," said volunteer Tyler Rogers, an NMSU junior studying wildlife science. He added that, as stressful as the capture and handling is for individual animals, transplanting sheep to bolster wild herds will help the species thrive overall.

Each ewe was checked to see whether she was pregnant, and if a pregnancy was confirmed, fitted with another transmitter for a study on lamb mortality rates. "We're trying to ascertain what we could do to increase (survival) rates," Rominger said.

Altogether over the two-day translocation effort, 25 ewes and rams were captured from Red Rock. From the processing site, they were placed in trailers and driven to release sites on the slopes of the Peloncillos and the Big Hatchets to join other herds.

"They see that mountain, and they run straight to it," Rominger said. "When they actually go out of the trailer, they've got the hammer down."