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For Immediate Release, March 4, 2014

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Jaguars Gain 1,194 Square Miles of Protected Habitat in Southwest

764,207-acre Designation Will Shield Rare Cats From Development, Including Proposed Rosemont Copper Mine

TUCSON, Ariz.— In response to a lawsuit from the Center for Biological Diversity, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today [finalized](#) protection for 764,207 acres, or 1,194 square miles, of habitat for endangered [jaguars](#) in southern Arizona and New Mexico. The historic “critical habitat” designation to help the great cats recover comes five years after a federal court rejected the Service’s argument that jaguars are too rare in the United States to merit habitat protection, and almost 17 years after the Service first protected jaguars under the Endangered Species Act in response to another court case brought by the Center.

“Welcome home, American jaguar,” said the Center’s Michael Robinson. “I’m hopeful that decades from now we’ll look back on this historic decision and see it as the first on-the-ground action that eventually led to the return of a thriving population of these beautiful big cats to this country.”

The critical habitat designation prohibits federal agencies from destroying or “adversely modifying” the habitat, such as by granting permits for mining or other commercial activities that would render the habitat unsuitable for jaguars. There is currently a jaguar living on U.S. Forest Service land in the Santa Rita Mountains outside Tucson in the footprint of the proposed Rosemont Copper Mine. Today’s designation will make it illegal for the Forest Service or the Fish and Wildlife Service to fund or authorize activities that would harm jaguar habitat.

The critical habitat designation consists of six units, each containing one or more mountain ranges in which jaguars have been recorded in recent years or through which they are thought to have traveled. The designation includes the Baboquivari, Pajarito, Atascosa, Tumacacori, Patagonia, Santa Rita and Huachuca mountain ranges in Arizona; the Peloncillo Mountains that straddle the Arizona/New Mexico border; and the northern tip of the San Luis Mountains in New Mexico’s “bootheel” region.

Missing from the designation are the Chiricahua Mountains in Arizona and vast stretches of the high, forested Mogollon Rim, including its easternmost terminus in New Mexico’s Gila National Forest. These areas were historically occupied by jaguars and still have suitable habitat for recovery today.

“While we’re disappointed that the protection omits the best U.S. habitat for jaguars — the rugged Gila headwaters in New Mexico and the pine-clad Mogollon Rim in Arizona — this decision is a milestone that protects much of the borderlands that the first generation of returning jaguars is exploring and inhabiting,” said Robinson.

Peer-reviewed research shows that species with designated critical habitat are twice as likely to be making progress toward recovery as those without. The Fish and Wildlife Service’s next step is the release of a draft jaguar recovery plan this spring.

Background

Jaguars are the third-largest cat in the world, after tigers and lions. Paleontological remains show that jaguars evolved in North America before colonizing the jungle habitats of South America. Jaguars were historically reported on the South Rim of the Grand Canyon, the mountains of Southern California, along grassland rivers in northeastern New Mexico and the Texas panhandle, and in the forests of Louisiana, Kentucky and North Carolina.

Jaguars disappeared from their U.S. range due to clearing of forests and draining of wetlands and killing to protect livestock. The last female jaguar in the United States was shot by a hunter in 1963 in Arizona’s Mogollon Rim. Although jaguars in Mexico are declining as well, dispersing male jaguars thought to emanate from the now-protected Northern Jaguar Reserve, 130 miles south of the border, have periodically established ranges in the United States. A jaguar repeatedly spotted in the Santa Rita Mountains in recent years is the first of the big cats documented in the country since 2009, when the Arizona Game and Fish Department injured (in an illegal capture operation) and later euthanized a jaguar that had lived at least 16 years in the Atascosa and Pajarito mountains.



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The Center for Biological Diversity is a national, nonprofit conservation organization with more than 675,000 members and online activists dedicated to the protection of endangered species and wild places.

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