

News Release

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**Conservation Organizations Object to Violations of Wilderness
Protections
Oppose Plan to Allow Hundreds of Helicopter Landings in Tonto
National Forest Wilderness Areas**

PHOENIX—Today conservation groups filed a formal objection to a plan by the Tonto National Forest to allow hundreds of helicopter landings in five Wilderness areas on the Tonto National Forest, ostensibly to “manage” bighorn sheep. The groups contend the action violates the Wilderness Act, the National Environmental Policy Act, the Endangered Species Act, the National Forest Management Act, and will harm wildlife including bighorn sheep, as well as other wilderness values. The conservation groups object to such heavy-handed manipulation of wildlife in Wilderness. Groups filing the Objection include Friends of Wild Animals (FOWA), Grand Canyon Chapter of the Sierra Club, Wilderness Watch, WildEarth Guardians, and SPEAK (Supporting and Promoting Ethics for the Animal Kingdom).

The Forest Service has released a draft decision that would allow up to 450 landings in Wilderness to capture, collar, recover, or release bighorn sheep. The project would last up to ten years. Wilderness, by legal definition, is a place “where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.” Wilderness is a wild, self-willed landscape. Motorized equipment is not allowed except in very rare circumstances where it is shown to be the minimum necessary to preserve the Wilderness.

Cyndi Tuell, a spokesman with Friends of Wild Animals, expressed concerns about this long-term project, “A plan to land helicopters in Wilderness areas for the next ten years flies in the face of what the Wilderness Act is all about. Humans should not try to dominate these wild sheep and wild lands, but rather allow the forces of nature to shape the future of the landscape.”

Gary Macfarlane of Wilderness Watch stated, “The Environmental Assessment admits that it is not necessary to use motorized equipment in Wilderness to manage bighorn sheep. Indeed, bighorns are an iconic wilderness species. It is ridiculous to suggest they require helicopter flights, radio collars, and net guns to survive. Wilderness is not a game farm, a petting zoo, or a rodeo arena for helicopter-mounted cowboys.”

“It is ironic and truly outrageous that during this 50th anniversary year of the Wilderness Act, the Forest Service is considering projects that knock a hole in the wilderness protections for some of our key wilderness areas, including the Superstition Wilderness and Four Peaks,” said Sandy Bahr, chapter director for Sierra Club’s Grand Canyon Chapter. “Sierra Club supports having healthy populations of bighorn sheep and other native wildlife, but we encourage the Forest Service to focus on maintaining and re-establishing connected and healthy habitat rather than this scheme to invade wilderness with helicopters.”

Friends of Wild Animals believes in the intrinsic value of wildlife and that they are entitled to live without significant human interference in their basic activities. FOWA also believes in the importance of balanced ecosystems with healthy predator-prey relationships and in the importance of preserving such ecosystems and wild areas for future generations.

Sierra Club’s mission is “to explore, enjoy, and protect the wild places of the earth; to practice and promote the responsible use of the earth’s ecosystems and resources; and to educate and enlist humanity to protect and restore the quality of the natural and human environments.”

SPEAK is a Tucson-based grassroots organization interested in protecting animals.

Wilderness Watch is a national wilderness advocacy organization, dedicated to the protection and proper administration of the National Wilderness Preservation System.

WildEarth Guardians is an environmental advocacy organization working to protect and restore the wildlife, wild rivers, and wild places of the American West.

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