



# News Release

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## Defendants Reach Plea Deal in Helicopter Harassment Case

(FLAGSTAFF, Ariz.) Two individuals accused of harassing wildlife with a helicopter have signed a plea agreement with the U.S. Attorney's Office. Chad Logan Smith, manager of a ranch in northern Arizona and Christopher Morris Atkinson, a contracted helicopter pilot working for the ranch, agreed to deferred sentences for their role in the August, 2014 incident.

According to the U.S. Attorney's Office, both men admitted to harassing a pronghorn antelope with a Robinson R44 helicopter piloted by Atkinson, near the boundaries of the O-R-O Ranch and Fort Rock Ranch on August 22, 2014. Originally reported by hunters and investigated by the Arizona Game and Fish Department, the case was completed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Attorney's Office. Harassing wildlife with a helicopter is a federal offense (a Class-A misdemeanor), punishable with a maximum fine of \$100,000 and up to six months in prison.

In statements included in the plea agreement, both Smith and Atkinson admitted that despite knowing the proximity of a helicopter would disturb the pronghorn, "We continued to do so, resulting in the pronghorn antelope fleeing or being chased from the area."

U.S. Magistrate Judge Deborah M. Fine accepted the plea agreements, which will defer judgment and sentencing for a period of four years to allow the defendants to demonstrate good conduct. According to court documents, during the 48-month deferral period Smith and Atkinson must not seek or obtain a hunting permit or engage in any hunting activity in Arizona or elsewhere; and not operate a helicopter in Arizona.

Chad Logan Smith also must forfeit his hunting guide license to the Arizona Game and Fish Department and divest himself of ownership or financial interest in Vaquero Outfitters or any other commercial hunting interest.

If the defendants abide by these terms, the U.S. Attorney's Office will dismiss this case on or before December 13, 2019, with no further proceedings. Failure to abide by any of these release conditions, could lead to a new hearing and proceed to sentencing.

*The Service's Office of Law Enforcement (OLE) protects the nation's fish, wildlife, and plants from unlawful exploitation and industrial hazards, and OLE works with our law enforcement partners on information sharing and investigations to effectively protect our Nation's wildlife resources.*

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