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News Release



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Beaverton Woman Admits Wildlife Crime

Deborah Walding of Beaverton, Oregon, pleaded guilty today to illegally offering to sell an endangered ocelot, a rare leopard species protected under the federal Endangered Species Act.

Walding entered her plea to a misdemeanor information charge in U.S. District Court in Portland. The charge claims that between February 2002 and April 12, 2002, she knowingly and unlawfully sold and offered for sale in interstate commerce, without a permit, an endangered species, namely an ocelot named "Little B." As part of the plea agreement she was not charged with offenses stemming from the sale and offer of sale of three other ocelots.

As few as 70 ocelots are known to remain in the wild in the United States, most of them on the Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge in south Texas. The large, nocturnal cats are endangered throughout their range in Texas and Central and South America, mostly as a result of habitat destruction and illegal trafficking in pelts. They are protected by national and international laws.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Dwight Holton said in court that Walding was an example of "a large hypocritical community" of exotic cat lovers that encourages poaching and illegal trafficking by creating a black market for ocelots and other exotic cats.

The trade in exotic cats and other exotic species is a booming business in the United States, said Paul Chang, chief law enforcement agent in the Fish and Wildlife Service's Pacific Region, headquartered in Portland.

"People in the U.S. are the primary purchasers of wildlife from around the world," Chang said. "The value of the wildlife trade is second only to the trade in illicit drugs."

As part of her plea negotiation, Walding agreed to cooperate with the U.S. Attorney's Office and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in further investigations of illegal trafficking in endangered species. She also agreed to speak at two national conventions of exotic animal enthusiasts about the laws protecting endangered species and how trading in them, even when they are captive-bred, creates an illegal market and contributes to the extinction of endangered animals. Her presentation must be prepared with the assistance and approval of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Sentencing is set for September 6, 2005.

Holton said he will recommend that Walding pay a \$25,000 community service fine to the World Wildlife Fund's North American Species Trafficking program to fund one or more projects intended to prevent trafficking in endangered species in the United States.

Ocelots can grow to 4 feet long, with a 1.5 foot-long tail, and weigh up to 75 pounds. They range in color from ash yellow to brownish-yellow and have a series of longitudinal black stripes running from the neck and over their back and flanks. A white spot called an ocellus is found on the back of the ears. The ocelot's primary habitat is thorn scrub and dense rainforest.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 545 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resources offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign and Native American tribal governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

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