



Fact Sheet

Southwest Region P.O. Box 1306 Albuquerque, NM 87103

SONORAN PRONGHORN - October 2003

Antilocapra americana sonoriensis

STATUS: Critically imperilled in both the United States and Mexico, the Sonoran pronghorn was first designated as endangered in the U.S. in 1967 under the Endangered Species Preservation Act of 1966, which was later affirmed by the Endangered Species Act of 1973. Sonoran pronghorn may have once freely ranged over more than 35,000 square miles in the U.S. and Mexico. The currently occupied habitat is now thought to be less than 10% of its former size. The world population of Sonoran pronghorn was estimated at 445 animals in December 2000 and just more than 300 in December 2002. These animals occur in two distinct subpopulations in Mexico and one in the U.S. with little or no interchange. An aerial census flown in December 2000 yielded an estimate of only 99 adult animals remaining in the U.S. This number is down markedly from a population high of over 200 recorded in March 1994. Good winter rainfall in 2000/2001 followed by an early monsoon that brought widely distributed rains across pronghorn habitat in 2001 created ideal conditions for fawn survival and recruitment. During the December 2001 fawn survey, the fawn:doe ratio was 78:100. To put this ratio in perspective, this was the highest fawn:doe ratio ever recorded for Sonoran pronghorn and in fact was the highest fawn:doe ratio reported for any pronghorn population in Arizona that year. Pronghorn biologists believe that upwards of 50 fawns in 2001 survived to be recruited into the population. Given some expected mortality in the adult component of the population, the December 2001 U.S. population was estimated to be 138 animals. Unfortunately, this record year in terms of fawn production and survival and recruitment was followed by arguably the worst drought year on record. From mid-August 2001 to early September 2002, less than 3/4 of an inch of rain fell (as measured by the National Weather Service gauge in Ajo) in an area that normally averages 9 inches. The effects on desert vegetation were catastrophic and many perennial plant species that Sonoran pronghorn depend on in their diet (such as mesquite, palo verde, ironwood, range ratany, and white bursage) died. Furthermore, without winter rains, no annual forbs were produced in the spring of 2002. Pronghorn does depend on a lush source of green growth, such as spring annuals to produce adequate milk for their fawns. Without this green annual flush of nutritious forage, most adult females produced twins, but none survived. This drought was so severe that the December 2002 population survey indicated that as few as 21 animals likely remained in the U.S. sub population. Sonoran pronghorn biologists have initiated an aggressive program of water developments, forage enhancements, seasonal area closures, and a semi-captive breeding enclosure to help reverse this decline.

DESCRIPTION: Pronghorn are proportionately long-legged and small-bodied mammals distinguished by large white areas of hair present on the rump, sides of face, two bands on the throat, underparts, and

part-way up the sides of the body. They have slightly curved horns, the males with a single prong projecting forward, and have woolly undercoats overlaid with long, straight, coarse, brittle guard hairs. The color of the animal varies from yellowish to tan, except for blackish on the top of the nose. The fastest land mammal in North America, the pronghorn is a small-bodied, long-legged speedster of the open plains and deserts capable of sustained speeds of 40 miles per hour with short bursts up to 50 miles per hour. The Sonoran pronghorn is an endangered subspecies of pronghorn native to the hot, dry Sonoran Desert of southwest Arizona and northern Sonora, Mexico.

LIFE HISTORY: Pronghorn does become sexually mature at 16 months and bucks at one year of age. Gestation is about 240 days. Sonoran pronghorn does have been observed with newborn fawns from February through May. Parturition occurs from February through May and rut during July, August, and September. Parturition appears to coincide with spring forage abundance.

Bucks congregate in summer for breeding and to pursue females. Does break off from groups to search for fawning areas. Does usually have twins, and fawns appear to suckle for about two months, feeding on vegetation soon thereafter. Does gather with fawns, and fawns sometimes form nursery groups.

Previous observations show average group sizes typically range from 2.5 to 5.1, with the largest groups being more than 20 animals. Groups of six to 15 pronghorn have been observed during the late fall and winter. Groups or herds begin to splinter during the late winter, with solitary pronghorn more common during the spring. During summer and early fall, herd sizes tend to range from five to six animals.

Cacti appear to make up a substantial part of Sonoran pronghorn diet. Some of the following appear to be the limiting factors: occurrence and continuance of drought possibly predisposing animals to predation; lack of available succulent cacti for forage, such as jumping chollas; and, possibly, the lack of available freestanding water.

HABITAT: In the U.S., Sonoran pronghorn habitat is located in the Sonoran Desert in broad alluvial valleys separated by block-faulted mountains. Creosote-bursage flats bordered by washes of palo verde, mesquite, and ironwood are used if forbs are present. Mesquite-creosote habitat bordering palo verde/mixed cacti bajadas are also used. Ephemeral washes are important during summer for thermal protection. In Mexico, fixed dunes with cholla are used in addition to the previously mentioned habitat.

RECOVERY NEEDS: In the near-term, recovery efforts should focus on: 1) improving habitat for fawn survival and recruitment through the establishment and evaluation of forage enhancement plots on the BMGR (USAF 2000); 2) initiating a quantitative evaluation of pronghorn use and reliance on sources of free water (temporary and permanent); 3) reducing predation through the selective removal of coyotes from specific areas and at times of the year when adult female pronghorn are most susceptible to predation (the need for coyote control will vary from year-to-year based on environmental conditions); 4) building and stocking a semi-captive breeding facility; 5) increasing frequency and expanding scope of aerial monitoring in Mexico to improve comparability with U. S. surveys; 6) investigating potential pronghorn disease vectors; 7) reducing disturbance at critical times of the year; and 8) investigating and reducing movement barriers. The Service will annually review implementation of the Recovery Plan to determine when revisions are appropriate, including the appropriateness of establishing delisting criteria.