

Radioactive goat on the run

Atomic animal got away from scientists

Reuters

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. — Before it's all over, the Atomic Goat may turn out to be a moral-filled fable about the dangers of scientific experimentation.

But, for now, all federal officials want is to find it and kill it.

The so-called Atomic Goat is a live radioactive goat on the loose in New Mexico, posing a threat to rare desert bighorn sheep unless searchers can kill it first, authorities said yesterday.

The searchers were using helicopters and airplanes with special tracking equipment in hopes of catching the animal before it could mingle with rare bighorn sheep.

The escaped animal was one of 62 Angora

goats fitted with radioactive isotopes in March in an experiment designed to track their movements and to determine the hunting patterns of coyotes. The scientists believed the coyotes would ingest the radioactive material if they killed and ate any of the goats, thereby revealing their habits.

After 10 goats broke out of the Jornada Experimental Range area in southern New Mexico in early May, federal officials ordered the experiment stopped and the goats killed.

Nine of the 10 escapees were captured, and their slightly radioactive carcasses were buried alongside the remains of the goats that had stayed behind.

The last goat has eluded searchers.

Bob Jenks of the New Mexico Game and

Fish Department said his agency is "concerned about environmental contamination" if isotopes are "consumed by various species or organisms or transferred along the food chain."

The experiment has involved officials from the Army's White Sands Missile Range, the New Mexico Game and Fish Department, the San Andres National Wildlife Refuge and the U.S. Agriculture Department's Denver Wildlife Research Center.

The experiment was hampered by dust storms, equipment failures and bureaucratic snafus, officials said.

"It was a great study, a nice idea," said scientist Kris Havstad, "but we couldn't pull it off in the field."