

Big cat shelter bound for Nevada: Pershing County haven to rescue, rehabilitate animals

BY Guy Clifton, Reno Gazette-Journal

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Rural Northern Nevada is about to become a haven for big cats and other wild animals in need of rescue and rehabilitation.

Linda (*sic*) and David Sugasa, who own the nonprofit Safe Haven Wildlife Center near Chicago, are in the process of moving their facility, to a 160-acre site in the Buena Vista Valley in eastern Pershing County.

Coming with them will be several permanent guests, including Monty and Cooper the cougars and Phoenix the bobcat. Not only does the facility rescue and rehabilitate animals, it also houses permanent-placement animals that can be viewed by the public and used in educational programs.

"We're very excited," Linda Sugasa said. "We are really looking forward to moving out there."

Her husband is already in Northern Nevada and starting to prepare the site, which is about halfway between Lovelock and Winnemucca near Imlay.

"We were looking to be able to buy a large land parcel to be able to expand our facility," Linda Sugasa said. "My husband has a lot of family out there so it seemed to be the perfect place."

David Sugasa, a recently retired pilot and aviation executive for the McDonald's Corporation, said it's nice to be back in Nevada.

"I was raised in Wells, Elko and Winnemucca and lived in Carson City and Reno," he said. "It is a homecoming. I've always wanted to move back West."

He said his uncle, Wally Seagraves, and cousin, Jan Griffin, both longtime Lovelock residents, helped find the property for the wildlife center.

"It's pretty pristine," David Sugasa said. "It's remote enough that it appeals to me."

The Nevada property will certainly be a change for Safe Haven and its resident animals.

It currently sits on 5 acres just outside of Marengo, Ill., and is one of the few places in the country equipped to take big cats, restore them to health and return them to the wild. (*Correction: Safe Haven does not return big cats to the wild.*) The demand is great, Linda Sugasa said. Just last year, the center had to turn down 50 cats from across the nation.

The planned larger facility in Nevada will allow Safe Haven to treat up to 20 big cats at a time, Sugasa said.

The cats won't be running free at any time, she added. They'll be held in enclosures.

The Illinois facility has a staff of 12 volunteers, several of whom are considering relocating to Nevada, Sugasa said. Safe Haven will be seeking volunteers for the Nevada operation.

Safe Haven is licensed with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and accredited by TAOS, The Association of Sanctuaries.

In addition, she added, Safe Haven isn't just for the big cats, but for other animals in need of treatment and care, as well.

"We don't turn away something because it's not a big cat," Linda Sugasa said. "It's based on need, and it's based on urgent need."

Safe Haven has also become a haven for animals that are part of the illegal pet trade. Linda Sugasa said such animals as mountain lions, arctic foxes and bobcats are favorites of illegal pet owners.

To make the move to Nevada, the Sugasas had to secure a special-use permit from the Pershing County Planning Commission.

Adam Niles, planning and building technician for Pershing County, said the permit was issued April 5. He said public reaction to the facility was mixed.

"I think there's a lot of people that are excited about it and a lot of people that are not so excited," he said. "I think some people are worried about the animals getting out."

Linda Sugasa said care of the animals is the top priority of the facility. It is not a zoo, she said, and any public viewing of the animals will be during limited hours so as not to put any stress on the animals.

Linda Sugasa said Safe Haven does plan a number of community-based projects once the facility is up and running in Nevada.

They include: classrooms for on-site educational presentations, an intern program and an Eagle Scout program.

She is continuing to run the facility in Illinois as her husband prepares the new one in Nevada.

David Sugasa said he hopes the new facility will be up and running before Christmas.

Safe Haven has also started a \$2 million nationwide capital campaign to help fund expansion of the facility and its education programs.