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Reis Lindley, foreground, of the Arizona Native Plant Society walks around a wildcat shooting area in the Ironwood Forest National Monument northwest of Tucson, last week.

Saguaros Serving as Shooting Targets

Flying Bullets Raise Concerns

By TONY DAVIS
Arizona Daily Star

TUCSON — Four saguaros up to 10 feet long lay prone last week near the base of a towering hill in Ironwood Forest National Monument — the latest symbols of a problem and a dispute that won't go away.

The saguaros near Avra Hill were found a month or so ago with spent bullets and shells lying nearby, say members of the Arizona Native Plant Society who reported them to the Bureau of Land Management. The BLM's law-enforcement branch is investigating this incident — one of two ongoing cactus-

shooting investigations, said Mark Rekshynskyj, a BLM official in Tucson.

"It looks like they targeted the arms first and shot off the arms, then went to the bases and shot them down," said the plant society's John Scheuring.

The dead cactuses have become ammunition for plant advocates in a long-running conflict with shooters over whether recreational target shooting should be banned from the monument, now nearly 12 years old.

The BLM is proposing to ban recreational shooting as part of a new management plan for the 129,000-acre monument. But the bureau is resisting a petition from nine groups including the plant society, the Sierra Club, the Wilderness Society and Friends of Ironwood Forest,

calling for an immediate ban instead of waiting until the agency can adopt the plan in six months to a year.

The National Rifle Association opposes the ban as an overreaction and suggests that the bureau target specific monument areas for closing.

The NRA is putting its weight behind a bill in Congress, sponsored by Arizona Rep. Jeff Flake, that would require congressional approval of a national monument recreational shooting ban lasting more than six months. The bill would make it BLM policy "to keep national monument lands open to access and use for recreational shooting."

Since before the feds created this monument 30 miles northwest of Tucson, recreational shooters have been

an issue, and the BLM, environmentalists, ranchers and neighboring residents now agree that plant shooting is increasing. Recurring target shooting is documented at 34 monument locations, the BLM says.

Ironwood monument rancher Steve Lehning said: "I've been talking about this for 19 years, and nobody has stopped them. Every year it gets worse." Fearful for his cattle's safety, he has sold all but six of his 120 head, he said. As he walked past Cerro Represso, another hill popular with shooters, he pointed to a swath of empty desert that he said used to contain many cactuses and trees, and to a scattering of saguaros with tops sheared off.

"One bullet at a time," Lehning said.