

Saguaro appeal

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Udall urges closer U.S.-state cooperation to curb thefts of Ariz., Old West 'symbol'

By Anne Hazard
States News Service

WASHINGTON — Rep. Morris K. Udall yesterday asked federal and state agents to work more closely in curbing thefts of the saguaro cactus, which he called "the symbol of Arizona and the Old West itself."

Noting that saguaros "may face a bleak future" because of increased thefts, Udall asked Interior Secretary Manuel Lujan to increase efforts of the Bureau of Land Management to work with state agencies enforcing laws against poaching.

Prime saguaros, which take 70 to 100 years to develop the arms that distinguish them, sell for \$1,000 or more as landscaping plants. A rare form, the cristate saguaro, which grows in a fan shape, has sold for as

much as \$15,000, Udall said.

Fewer than 100 cristate saguaros are known to exist in the wild, the lawmaker said.

"Continued theft of mature plants will rob the species of seedlings, virtually dooming the giant cacti," he noted.

Communication between BLM agents and the Arizona Commission of Agriculture and Horticulture needs to be improved, Udall said in a letter to Lujan. The agencies now cannot talk on two-way radios because they use different frequencies.

"Communication between the two agencies is often a long process, reducing responses to theft reports. . . . Field agents must first reach their respective dispatchers who then

contact the other agency. In the meantime, the cactus thief is long gone," Udall said.

"Saguaro theft is relatively fast and easy; the plants are often dug up and transported away before state or federal officials can respond," he said.

About 15 percent of the saguaros stolen are taken from private land, and the rest are removed from government land held by the BLM, the state or an Indian reservation, said Larry Richards, an officer with the Arizona Department of Agriculture.

Last year, the department issued 77 citations to plant thieves who were caught in the act, Richards said. Of these, more than half were stealing or trying to sell saguaros, he said.



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Rep. Morris K. Udall says saguaros "may face a bleak future" because of increased thefts.