

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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CONTACT:

Julie R. Frim
Community Relations Coordinator
Office: 740-638-5030, ext. 2345
Cell: 614-806-6856
jfrim@thewilds.org

NOTE TO MEDIA:

Photos and video are available upon request.

RARE PERSIAN ONAGERS BORN AT *THE WILDS* FIRST WILD EQUIDS TO BE BORN THROUGH ARTIFICIAL INSEMINATION

Cumberland, OH -- Four years of work by a team of scientists, veterinarians, animal care specialists and interns from *the Wilds* and the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute (SCBI) have culminated in the birth of two rare Persian onagers (pronounced **on-uh-ger**). The foals, born at *the Wilds* on June 28, 2010 and July 9, 2010, are the first wild equids of any species to be born using artificial insemination. One foal was produced using semen that had previously been frozen, another scientific "first."

Scientists spent two years at *the Wilds* learning about the normal reproductive biology of onagers that until now had largely gone unstudied. The project led by Mandi Vick, a post-doctoral fellow at *the Wilds* and the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute in Virginia, included developing non-invasive hormone monitoring to follow the normal reproductive cycles and semen cryopreservation (freezing) and storage--research that was essential to the successful breeding of the onagers.

"It is amazing when you take a step back and realize all of the hard work, enthusiasm and expertise that go into understanding the uniqueness of how each species reproduces and how scientific technologies can be applied to ensure sustainable populations," said Vick, now Associate Curator of Research at the Cleveland Metroparks Zoo. "This work demonstrates the power of science for improving our ability to manage and conserve not only Persian onagers, but also other species of endangered equids."

By the third year of the study, the team had the tools and information needed to attempt the artificial inseminations. In July and August 2009, three females were inseminated with sperm collected from different males all living at *the Wilds* where the procedures were performed utilizing specialized handling facilities. The births occurred after gestation periods of 347 and 325 days.

The endangered Persian onager (*Equus hemionus onager*) is an Asiatic wild ass and a member of the Equidae (horse) family. There are believed to be approximately 600-700 onagers remaining in two protected areas in Iran where the population is severely threatened by loss of desert habitat, poaching and competition with domestic livestock.

There are fewer than 30 onagers maintained in zoological institutions in all of North America and less than 100 in institutions worldwide. The current population is not self-sustaining and there is an urgent need to establish a healthy population of onagers as a hedge against extinction, and eventually, perhaps a resource for future reintroduction.

This work is part of *the Wilds'* and SCBI's collaboration with the Conservation Centers for Species Survival (C2S2), a group of large conservation facilities in North America dedicated to cooperative breeding and research for the advancement of species conservation. Established in 2005, C2S2 applies its unique resources for the survival of species with special needs; especially those requiring large living areas, natural group sizes, minimal public disturbance and scientific research. *The Wilds* and SCBI are founding members of C2S2, along with [Fossil Rim Wildlife Center](#), [White Oak Conservation Center](#), and [San Diego Zoo's Wild Animal Park](#),

With the birth of the two new foals there are currently 17 Persian onagers at *the Wilds*. The first onagers came to *the Wilds* in 1997 and 14 other foals have been born there. Onagers, as well as more than 25 other rare and endangered species from Africa, Asia and North America, can be seen from Safari Transport and Open-Air Safari tours offered daily June-August and on weekends in May, September and October at *the Wilds*.

The Wilds, one of the largest conservation centers in North America, is home to rare and endangered animals from around the world along with hundreds of indigenous species. The mission of *the Wilds*, a nonprofit organization, is to advance conservation through science, education and personal experience. For more information, visit www.thewilds.org.