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Don't cry wolf

Revising recovery program needs careful thought

Editorial

The Mexican wolf recovery program corrects mistakes made when wolves were systematically exterminated for the sake of cattle ranching.

You can help prevent mistakes in the way that program is carried out by getting involved in a public comment process that includes a meeting Tuesday night in Phoenix.

One proposal by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service would prohibit the relocation of wolves from Arizona to New Mexico. This is a mistake.

Such relocations are currently the only way wolves can be released into New Mexico, which contains 75 percent of the recovery area and includes top-notch wolf habitat.

Rather than impose this new restriction, a revised plan should rescind the prohibition on releasing wolves from the captive population directly into New Mexico.

The goal is to achieve a sustainable wild population of Mexican wolves, not create barriers. With that in mind, the proposal for a one-year ban on releasing any wolves into the wild from the captive population also looks unwise. Wildlife biologists running the program should be free to make decisions without arbitrary restrictions.

Another mistake would be to lower the threshold for killing wolves that acquire a taste for beef. This is an area of particular controversy.

During recent public hearings in New Mexico, some ranchers called for a complete end to the wolf-reintroduction program. They say it puts their cows in peril.

But wolf reintroduction benefits the entire ecosystem and the public. Accommodating that program can hardly be seen as an undue burden on ranchers who lease public land at low rates.

In addition, Defenders of Wildlife runs a program to reimburse ranchers for any livestock lost to wolves. What's more, ranchers can prevent problems.

Research shows that wolves usually begin preying on cattle only after first scavenging on cow carcasses. Ranchers can protect their interests by removing dead cows from the range or treating the carcasses with lime so they are unappetizing to wolves.

Ranchers' needs deserve consideration, but they have a responsibility to act as wise stewards on the public land that they are permitted to use. In this case, that means doing everything in their power to protect their livestock and make wolf recovery a success. You can also help make wolf recovery a success.

Written comments submitted at Tuesday's meeting (6 p.m. at the Maricopa County Fairgrounds Wildlife Building) will be considered when finalizing changes to the recovery plan.

Written comments also will be accepted until July 31 by mail or e-mail. More information can be found at <http://mexicanwolf.fws.gov/>

It's your chance to make sure this program continues to enrich Arizona.