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Gila Wolf Killed By Feds

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The alpha male of the Ring Pack wolves was killed by a federal sharpshooter in the Gila National Forest on Sunday, the third endangered wolf shot to death by the government since an effort to restore the species started in 1998.

The wolf, which had been blamed for four confirmed cattle killings and was suspected by ranchers of several more, was shot from a helicopter in the Collins Park area of the Gila in southwestern New Mexico.

"We're very disturbed," said Michael Robinson of the Center for Biological Diversity in Pinos Altos. "The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is out of control."

"Any relief we can get certainly helps," said Gila rancher Fred Galley, who says he has lost cows and calves to wolves this year. "This has been an extremely trying spring."

The Mexican gray wolf reintroduction program in the Southwest is a cooperative effort of federal, state and tribal agencies. But it is up to the Fish and Wildlife Service to issue kill orders for wolves that repeatedly kill livestock.

The Ring Pack male first got a taste for beef when he fed on a carcass in the area in 2003, a common problem that should be addressed by requiring ranchers to remove carcasses or make them

unpalatable, Robinson said.

Galley and other ranchers southeast of Reserve have been losing cattle to the Ring and Francisco pack wolves since late April. They and other Gila ranchers have complained bitterly about the wolf program and said all the lobos should be removed from the wild.

The Francisco Pack— an alpha pair, a male yearling and four pups— all were taken into captivity recently after the adults killed several cattle in the Gila. The adults never again will be released in the wild.

Wildlife Services, an arm of the U.S. Department of Agriculture and a member of the wolf field team, tried without success to track down the Ring Pack male from an airplane before bringing in a helicopter over the weekend.

"On Sunday in tracking the female's collar, they found them in a flat area and were able to implement the lethal take on the male," said John Morgart, Mexican wolf recovery coordinator.

Although the male's collar stopped working several weeks ago, he could be identified by his color, Morgart said.

The wolf program field team now is focusing its efforts on trapping the alpha female of the pack— who has been blamed for two cattle killings— and her 10-week-old pups.

The loss of the Francisco and Ring packs reduces the number of breeding

pairs in the wild to seven and is a concern, Morgart said.

"It's obviously going to have an effect," he said. "By the same token, we have a responsibility to the folks who live on the ground."

Kill orders have been issued for other wolves, including the Francisco Pack.

Federal agents shot a male wolf last July after it killed five cattle in Arizona. A female wolf was shot in 2003 for killing five calves in New Mexico. In 2002, the service approved killing two wolves implicated in a number of livestock deaths in Arizona, but those wolves were never found.