Wolf Program Faces Challenge

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LAS CRUCES — It was another challenging year for the restoration of endangered Mexican gray wolves.

Whatever the outcome of ongoing investigations, 2008 will end up being one of the worst in the nearly 11-year history of the Mexican gray wolf reintroduction program in terms of suspicious killings.

Seven wolf deaths in 2008 are under investigation by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and at least four of the wolves are known to have been shot to death, according to the federal agency.

Two of the wolves that were shot, and a third whose death is still being investigated, were members of wolf pairs that could have bred in the wild — a key intention of the endangered species restoration efforts.

The Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area straddles the mountainous border between southeast Arizona and southwest New Mexico. Between 1998 and 2007, when wolves were first released into the area, a total of 24 wolves have been shot illegally.

The worst year so far for wolf poaching cases was 2003, when seven wolves were shot. Four wolves were shot in 1998 and another four were shot in 2001. Only one poaching case has been successfully prosecuted. Another case was ruled a self-defense.

"It is alarming," said Michael Robinson of the Center for Biological Diversity in Pinos Altos. "Clearly, this is a high number this year, and it is very disturbing. ... We find each one of these deaths heartbreaking. It is one of the factors that has so far kept the numbers (of wolves) suppressed, the other big factor being federal predator control."

Environmentalists say a federal policy of removing from the wild any wolves that have killed livestock three times in a one-year period has undermined the growth of the wild wolf population.

The Fish and Wildlife Service's annual census of Mexican gray wolves in the wild is to be released in February.

At the end of 2007 there were 52 Mexican gray wolves in the wild — a disappointing number for wolf advocates, who noted that a 1996 environmental impact statement projected there would be about 100 wolves roaming Southwest forests by the end of 2006.

Meanwhile, critics of the program — including ranchers who have lost livestock to the wolves — say there are more wolves in the wild than the official census.

Illegally killing a Mexican wolf, a violation of the federal Endangered Species Act, is punishable by criminal penalties of up to $50,000 and a year in jail, or a civil penalty of up to $25,000.

John Oakleaf, the Mexican gray wolf field projects coordinator for the Fish and Wildlife Service, said the long-term impact of the wolf killings will not be known until biologists determine whether surviving members of pairs mate with other wolves.

But, despite the number of suspicious deaths, Oakleaf said the overall survival rate of radio-collared

wolves was higher than normal in 2008.

"Every time a wolf goes down it hurts," Oakleaf said, "but I try to focus on the overall population."

Oakleaf said humans will continue to kill wolves when their paths cross, but he said poaching will not derail the Mexican gray wolf reintroduction program.

"Certainly those types of actions aren't going to win," Oakleaf said. "While they are setbacks, obviously we can be aggressive in terms of releases and translocations to replace those animals."

Altogether in 2008, 13 wolves died in the recovery area, including two wolves that were accidentally struck by cars and four cases in which the cause of death could not be determined.

A fourteenth wolf, the Elk Mountain pack alpha male whose mate was found shot to death in late April, has not been seen or detected by radio collar since July. Recovery program biologists stopped mentioning the alpha male in monthly reports over the summer, but Oakleaf said he has not reached any conclusions about the wolf's fate.

The Fish and Wildlife Service has offered a reward of up to $10,000 for information leading to the arrest and conviction of anyone who has illegally shot a wolf.