

THURSDAY  
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# Groups ask for suspension of wolf control policy

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. -- More than two dozen conservation groups have asked the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to suspend a policy that they say is undermining the endangered Mexican gray wolf reintroduction program in New Mexico and Arizona.

The policy in question sets guidelines for dealing with wolves that prey on livestock. After three confirmed depredations in a certain period, officials with the reintroduction program can permanently remove a wolf from the wild, either by capturing it or using lethal means.

"This wolf-destroying policy is a pox on the lobo," Michael Robinson of the Center for Biological Diversity said Wednesday. "But unlike parvovirus or distemper, (the policy) is a bureaucratic affliction."

The letter was addressed to Fish and Wildlife's Southwest regional director, Benjamin Tuggles, and although the agency is aware of the letter, it had not yet received it, John Mogart, coordinator for the wolf recovery program, said Thursday.

The policy, one of about 20 standard operating procedures that govern the program, was put together after hearings and extensive comments from both sides - ranchers concerned about

their livestock and conservationists who want to see the wolf program grow, Mogart said.

The policy is not perfect, "but these are dynamic documents, they are not set in stone," he said.

Federal biologists began releasing wolves on the Arizona-New Mexico border in 1998 to re-establish the species in part of its historic range after it had been hunted to the brink of extinction in the early 1900s.

Robinson said the federal government supports the reintroduction program on one hand but on the other is "killing wolves just for being wolves" to appease livestock owners.

The conservation groups say the wolf control policy \_ known as SOP 13 \_ doesn't take into account the wolf's genetic value, its social relationship with other pack members, its reproductive status or other factors.

In a letter sent Wednesday to the Fish and Wildlife Service, the groups argue that enforcement of the policy threatens to eliminate at least two wolf packs currently in the wild.

The letter asks that the policy be temporarily suspended until the agency has more than 100 wolves, including 18 breeding pairs, in the wild.

"Although this goal was projected to be reached by the end of 2006, it seems increasingly unlikely to ever be achieved under current management," the letter reads.

At the end of 2006, there were 59 wolves throughout the reintroduction area in New Mexico and Arizona. Of those, 46 were born in the wild.