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At a Crossroads

The feds seek public comment on a stumbling wolf-reintroduction program

By TIM VANDERPOOL

When their primal howl returned to the Southwest, it was a soaring crescendo of unfettered hopes. But nearly a decade after reintroduction of the Mexican gray wolf began, the project has floundered amid trenchant rancher opposition and government diffidence.

Today, numerous rancher-prompted factors hobbling the program--from restrictions on where wolves can roam to the overzealous removal of "offending" wolves--are finally being revisited. That reform process arrives in Tucson this week when the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service hosts a public meeting on the UA campus.

Agency officials will gather public comment in preparation for an environmental impact statement regarding changes to the wolf program. But even as their effort gets underway, it remains unclear just how much new muscle the project will receive.

To conservationists like Michael Robinson, this is the last, best chance to salvage the Mexican wolf project. Robinson is author of Predatory Bureaucracy: The Extermination of Wolves and the Transformation of the West and a wolf policy expert with the Tucson-based Center for Biological Diversity.

The center helped prod federal officials along this path, with a legal petition demanding that science be given precedence over politics. Agency officials relented in August, with a notice in the Federal Register admitting that current measures "are not conducive to achieving the reintroduction project objective of 're-establishing a viable, self-sustaining population of at least 100 Mexican (gray) wolves.'" Presently, there are only about 60 wolves on the ground.

Among other things, Robinson wants strict boundaries for the wolves to be relaxed. He also argues for full endangered species protection, rather than the less-stringent "experimental nonessential" designation the wolves currently have. Under that designation, FWS reviews are not required when other agencies take actions that might affect wolves, such as by allowing logging operations in federal forests.

Robinson calls that ridiculous. "This is a unique subspecies that was entirely exterminated entirely from the wild," he says. "But now to suggest that the lone remaining population is not essential to the survival of the species is absurd on its face."

The Mexican gray wolf is barely surviving.

He would also like to see the brakes places on ranchers, who are still agitating for greater leeway to shoot these federally protected animals on federal land they lease for cattle grazing. Conservationists have long contended that ranchers themselves contribute to predation problems by failing to clear wolf-attracting cow carcasses from the range.

But officials caution against unrealistic expectations. "Basically, this wolf would be an easy animal to reintroduce and recover," says John Slown, a FWS biologist overseeing the program's revision. "It's so adaptable and so capable. But what makes it difficult are politics and the human dimension."

For example, "If we created another dispersion area--so wolves could move from area one to another--that

would be good for the program. What remains to be seen is if that will be viable."

Marked by tawny coats with patches of black and gray, Mexican wolves once ranged from New Mexico and Texas to Arizona and Mexico. They thrived on a steady supply of elk, deer and small animals until the mid-19th century, when cattle ranching boomed; prey was soon thinned out by hunters, and overgrazing devastated the habitat.

Not surprisingly, the wolves turned to increasingly plentiful livestock--and set the stage for conflict. Under pressure from ranchers, hunters with the federal government's Predatory Animal and Rodent Control program had killed all but a few wolves by the 1950s.

Ironically, Canis lupus baileyi had been completely eradicated in the United States by 1976, when the government changed course by adding it to the endangered-species list. The first baby steps toward Mexican-gray recovery began in the late 1970s, as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service contracted a trapper to bring a pregnant female and four males from Mexico. Believed to be the last remaining wolves in the wild, they seeded a captive breeding program that eventually expanded to 43 facilities in the United States and Mexico.

This groundwork culminated in the 1998 release of 11 wolves into what's called the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area, which includes the Arizona's Apache National Forest, and the Gila National Forest in New Mexico.

There have been more than 90 releases since then, all against a backdrop of turf battles between state and federal agencies, and fierce resistance from ranchers. For example, political pressure has restricted new releases to the Arizona portion of the recovery area. Ranchers also successfully pressured the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish away from fully participating in the program for the first few years.

Dr. David Mech is a noted wolf expert with the U.S. Department of Interior, and a board member of the International Wolf Center in Ely, Minn. In an earlier interview, he said that nobody went into the Mexican wolf project wearing blinders. "We knew from the beginning, before they were ever released, that there were ... major challenges."

For one, survival rates are lower for captive-bred wolves, which must learn to hunt and avoid humans. Second, "there were no areas for release that were totally wild," Mech said. Instead, they all contained livestock--and plenty of resentful ranchers. In recovery areas, "the general public was so anti-wolf. And those human attitudes were very difficult to overcome."

Now the tide seems to be shifting. Calls for reform grew louder in June, when the influential American Society of Mammalogists issued a lengthy resolution taking the FWS to task. The agency was chastised for not adhering to the Endangered Species Act, which mandates "formal recovery plans for all listed taxa using the best available science."

As examples, the group cited confinement of wolves to an "arbitrary" reintroduction area, active predator control aimed directly at Mexican wolves and a failure to compel ranchers to remove cow carcasses.

Another group of scientists--led by David Parsons, former wolf program coordinator for the FWS--recently dispatched a letter to Dr. Benjamin Tuggle, the agency's Southwest regional director. They noted the dismal fate of too many wolves in the reintroduction area. "I am ... aware of at least 10 adult or subadult wolves that have been illegally killed, killed or removed by the USFWS, or have mysteriously disappeared already this year," Parsons wrote.

He also cites the growing problem of inbreeding among wolves cloistered within reintroduction boundaries, and continued reliance on captive-bred wolves to bolster the wild population.

"We implore the USFWS," wrote Parsons, "... to expedite a rule change that will meet the 'conservation' mandate of the Endangered Species Act."

Whether that happens remains to be seen.