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U.S. FISH & WILDLIFE SERVICE RELEASES FIVE YEAR REVIEW OF MEXICAN WOLF REINTRODUCTION

Self-contradictory document recommends allowing wolves to roam outside of boundaries and concludes 91% of wolves that scavenge livestock carcasses go on to attack stock — but hints federal agency will not act to reform program.

Yesterday afternoon the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service released 164 pages of summary and discussion about the Mexican gray wolf reintroduction program in a review that had been mandated in the program's 1996 environmental impact statement (EIS).

The five year review, released in draft form and not scheduled to be finalized until after the seven year anniversary of the first Mexican wolf releases of March 1998, comes in the wake of the agency's failure to follow the principal recommendations of its three year review.

The three year review, also known as the Paquet Report for lead author Paul C. Paquet, Ph.D. of the University of Calgary, was conducted by four independent scientists. The five year review, in contrast, was written by federal and state officials.

When the three year review was released in June 2001, there were 27 radio collared and monitored wolves in the wild, plus an unknown number of uncollared wolves. Today, there are still 27 radio collared and monitored wolves in the wild, plus an unknown number of uncollared wolves.

The EIS had projected 68 wolves in the wild by the end of this December. Fish and Wildlife Service now estimates, and the Center for Biological Diversity concurs, that there are approximately 50 wolves in the wild right now. The EIS had projected twelve breeding pairs by the end of this year; the actual number known so far this year is five.

Review recommends allowing wolves to roam outside of boundaries, but frankly acknowledges political obstacles.

Some of the unheeded recommendations in the three year review also found their way into the five year review, alongside caveats suggesting the suggested reforms were no closer to being implemented today.

The Mexican wolf is the only endangered species in the United States that the Fish and Wildlife Service is required to remove or kill if members of the subspecies live outside arbitrary boundary lines (that delineate the Gila and Apache National Forests and the Fort Apache Indian Reservation). The three year review urged a rule change in the Federal Register to allow Fish and Wildlife Service to make case by case decisions on whether or not to allow Mexican wolves to roam freely, just as it manages other high-profile endangered species.

The five year review says the same thing: "Present recovery zone boundaries are inadequate and impeding wolf recovery" (Technical section, p. 103). And, "we recommend that the project modify the final non-essential experimental rule to allow for wolves to occur in areas within the southwestern distinct population segment (SWDPS) of the gray wolf where they do
not conflict with livestock or humans." (Technical section, p. 41)

The document also states: "Using December 31, 2003 as the cut off date for this Five-Year Review analysis, the Service has removed a total of 21 wolves as a direct result of the boundary restrictions imposed by the rule" (Administrative section, p. 12). This constituted the "greatest single cause of removal." (Technical section, p. 23)

But it adds, "the Regional Director [H. Dale Hall] has stated that in order to revise the rule, the Service must first have a unified, consensus recommendation from the SWDPS Recovery Team, including both the Technical and Stakeholder sub-groups" (Administrative section, p. 10). Since the Stakeholder group of this recovery team is stacked with livestock and outfitting industry representatives who oppose wolf recovery, this caveat is tantamount to an admission the rule will never get changed, said Michael Robinson of the Center for Biological Diversity (who also serves on the Stakeholder group of the recovery team).

The review itself had this to say in a startling footnote to the remark on the Regional Director's criteria: "This approach may be in conflict with New Mexico’s Game Commission motion which indicated support for a rule change to address direct releases into New Mexico. Also, this approach does not fully utilize the expertise and recommendations from entities that are directly involved in the BRWRA reintroduction project, and the effect of the rule on successful reintroduction. This approach may also lessen the value of input from the Adaptive Management Oversight Committee and the Adaptive Management Working Group." (Administrative section, p. 10)

Review finds 91% correlation between wolves that scavenge livestock carcasses and those involved in "depredations."

Addressing another issue, the writers of the five year review did not follow the three year review's recommendation that ranchers be required to remove or render inedible the carcasses of their stock that die of non-wolf causes before wolves scavenge on them and become habituated to cattle or horses. The review concluded "Of the 22 Mexican gray wolves known to have scavenged on domestic livestock carcasses, 91 percent have been confirmed to have depredated domestic livestock" (Administrative section, p. 23). Fully fifty percent (22 out of 44) of wolves that attacked livestock were documented to have fed on domestic animals they did not kill.

Robinson of the Center for Biological Diversity noted that some of the wolves not known to have scavenged on already-dead livestock may in fact have done so before honing in on cattle as prey. "The government can't monitor every animal every day," said Robinson. "But the ninety-one percent figure indicates that a wolf that gets a free meal from a dead cow or horse is in a world of trouble. We don't allow people to leave out garbage for bears and we shouldn't allow ranchers on public land to leave dead stock out for wolves."

But the five year review states (referring back to the recommendation of the three year review), "the domestic carcass issue is . . . not completed. In order to complete this task, the AMOC must work with the livestock industry and other interested publics through the AMWG public process to create a workable solution or collaboratively determine no action is necessary" (Administrative section, p. 24).

Translation from Bureaucratize to English: It ain't gonna happen.

Review's omission of fate of Lupine Pack skews understanding of effects of translocations.

In another respect, the five year review omits the government's own information to misinterpret the effect of capturing and moving wolves. The three year review stated that such captures and accompanying "translocations" risk injury to the wolves and disrupt social patterns necessary for recovery. But the five year review concludes, counter-intuitively, that "known fate" translocated wolves are twice as likely to reproduce (37%) than those released directly from captivity (18%) (Administrative section, p. 19) even though every single pack that was translocated during the period under review split apart immediately upon re-release.

The answer lies in two statistical errors. First, the government does not count the ten pups (in three separate litters) conceived in the wild that died (some after being born in captivity) as a result of capture or being held captive (documentation
is available from the Center for Biological Diversity); thus the incidents of successful breeding are measured as an absolute (yes/no) event rather than as a per year event in which pups dying in captivity lessen the success rate. Second, the government ignores the statistical anomaly represented by the demise of the short-lived Lupine Pack, six of whose nine members constituted ten percent of the 60 wolves released directly from captivity (ie. not translocated) whose fates are known.

The Lupine Pack was released in June 2001 in Arizona within the territory of the already established Saddle Pack. When the resident wolves discovered these new animals they attacked them. The Lupine's alpha male, wolf #480, suffered a fatal series of events uncovered in his necropsy (obtained by the Center via the Freedom of Information Act, and available for inspection): bite wounds from other wolves, a rattlesnake bite that likely ensued as he fled the Saddle Pack, concluding in asphyxiation by his radio collar as his neck swelled in response to the bite.

The rest of the pack members fled separately in the wake of this attack and the alpha male's death so soon after their release, and four of them were picked off by poachers in widely scattered locales; the last known surviving pup was captured by Fish and Wildlife Service, and three are still missing (and thus not counted among the 60 "known fate" initial release wolves). (Omitting this history, the five year review states, “There were no wolf mortalities from intraspecific strife” (Technical section,1 p. 37).)

Why were the Lupine animals released within the territory of another pack? The reason is that the Federal Register rule forbids the release of wolves from the captive breeding program into New Mexico, where there was (and still is) abundant unoccupied wolf habitat; the rule only allows wolves to be released in New Mexico if they are being translocated and had been previously captured from the wild. (That aspect of the rule is also criticized in both the three year and five year review, but is similarly unlikely to change.)

The Lupine Pack, never having been in the wild previously, could only be released into Arizona, and there was no large area available in Arizona's portion of the recovery area without already established packs. If the Lupine Pack's six known fate wolves, whose losses represented an artifact of the federal rule, are not counted among those initially released, then the reproductive success rate for those animals reaches 20%, somewhat closer to the 37% reproductive success rate among known fate translocates, given that that rate was artificially inflated by not counting the ten pups of those translocates that died in captivity as a result of capture.

By making it seem as if translocations and the accompanying capture process actually aid wolf recovery, the five year review undercuts any remaining government motivation to reform the program and forestall preventable control actions. Even the overarching question of recovery remains unexamined: Is the population on a path to being viable given current trends. (Wolf geneticist Philip Hedrick, Ph.D. of Arizona State University has recently warned that government captures and shootings of wolves have led to the narrowing of a gene pool that stems from just seven original founding animals.)

What comes across in the five year review most of all is a story of lobos whose instincts serve them well in wild survival, and of an interagency government wolf bureaucracy dulled by too many years of captivity.