

Wildlife Service To Allow Predator Wolf To Remain in Wild

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LAS CRUCES — The Fish and Wildlife Service has decided to let a Mexican gray wolf remain in the wild even though it could have been removed under a policy that targets wolves found to have killed three cows in a one-year period.

In a decision issued Friday, Benjamin Tugale, director of the Southwestern region for

the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, said that a major factor in his decision was the "relatively low population" of the Mexican gray wolf in southwestern New Mexico and southeastern Arizona that "continues to be of great concern."

The wolf population, which numbered 59 at the end of 2006, dropped to 52 at the end of 2007 and stayed at the number at the end of 2008.

The wolf at issue, the alpha male of the San Mateo pack,

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BENJAMIN TUGALE, DIRECTOR OF THE SOUTHWESTERN REGION FOR THE U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

is believed to have fathered at least four pups whose survival could depend on the presence of two parents, but the wolf had killed four cows during

the past year. "A decision to remove this wolf from the landscape at this particular time could be detrimental to any potential population gains," Tugale wrote in his decision.

Wolf advocates have blamed poaching and government removal of wolves for cattle depredation for preventing the growth of the wolf population, which had been expected to reach about 100 by the end of 2006.

Fish and Wildlife spokesman Jose Viramontes said Tugale's decision reflects increased flexibility in wolf-removal protocols, a stance adopted in

May by cooperating state, federal and tribal agencies to take into account circumstances such as the presence of pups.

Michael Robinson of the Center for Biological Diversity hailed Tugale's decision. But Laura Schneberger, president of the Gila Livestock Growers Association, said the decision reflected an increasing unwillingness by federal officials to remove or kill wolves that prey on livestock.