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2009 marks another deadly year for Mexican wolf

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ALBUQUERQUE, N.M.—Another Mexican gray wolf has been found dead, and federal law enforcement agents are investigating.

It's the 10th wolf to turn up dead in the wild over the past year as the effort to reintroduce the endangered wolf to the Southwest continues to stumble along in the mountains of New Mexico and Arizona.

"It is of great concern to us because there are so few wolves in the wild," Bud Fazio, head of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's wolf recovery effort, said in an interview Tuesday. "Any time one dies, it does have an impact, but we need to keep moving forward and establishing this population."

The alpha male of the Bacho Pack was found dead in late November on the San Carlos Apache Reservation in southeastern Arizona. The wolf was last located alive in mid-October on the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest, west of the Arizona-New Mexico line.

The carcass was collected by law enforcement agents, but the Fish and Wildlife Service said Tuesday it has not determined how the animal died.

Investigations also continue into the other wolf deaths that have been reported over the past 12 months, said Fish and Wildlife Service spokesman Jose Viramontes. Two of the animals were found in Arizona and seven in New Mexico, including three pups that belonged to the San Mateo Pack.

The dead wolves represent nearly 20 percent of the known wild population. There are more than 50 wolves in the wild in Arizona and New Mexico, but that's half of what biologists had hoped to have by now.

A subspecies of the gray wolf, the Mexican wolf was exterminated in the wild by the 1930s. The government began reintroducing wolves in 1998 along the Arizona-New Mexico line, in a territory of more than 4 million acres interspersed with forests, private land and towns.

The reintroduction program has been plagued by illegal shootings, complaints from ranchers who have lost cattle to the wolves and environmentalists who are critical of the way the federal government has managed the program.

Michael Robinson of the Center for Biological Diversity said the wolf population, with its small numbers and limited genetic diversity, suffers a setback every time an animal dies.

While the causes of death for the wolves found in the last year have yet to be determined, Robinson said many of the mortalities over the past 12 years have stemmed from poaching. He said as long as wildlife managers are not removing wolves from the wild due of conflicts with people or livestock, the population will be able to survive a certain level of poaching.

"I'm encouraged that their numbers can increase despite a handful of dead-enders who are malevolent and well-armed," Robinson said.

The Fish and Wildlife Service said it has several methods for trying to determine what killed a wolf, including blood and tissue tests that look for disease or poison. Metal detectors can also be used to scan the carcass for bullets or other foreign objects.

Agency spokesman Tom Buckley said the job can be impossible if the carcass is too decomposed.

The agency is conducting a count of wolves in the wild and hopes to have a more accurate number by the end of January. Officials said there are currently 28 collared wolves in New Mexico and Arizona and an unknown number of uncollared wolves and pups.