

# THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC



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## It's succeeding despite setbacks

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### *The Arizona Republic*

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In a wintry forest in eastern Arizona, wolf howls cut the cushiony silence of falling snow. It is eloquent testimony to the success of the Mexican-gray-wolf reintroduction effort.

Yes. We said success.

We say this as the program continues to be tarred by both supporters and critics.

Mexican gray wolves were reintroduced more than a decade ago from a remnant population of captive animals. They learned to live, hunt and reproduce in the wild.

That's success. But the program was dogged by the low growl of politics since before the first wolf took her first step to freedom. The thud of legal papers hitting the courts is another familiar sound.

Ranchers who lease grazing rights on public land say the wolves threaten their livelihood. Environmentalists say the reintroduction effort was

designed more to placate public-land ranchers than to serve wolf recovery.

Wolf numbers support the argument of environmentalists. The current population is about 52 animals; wildlife biologists expected twice that many by now.

The paltry population is largely the result of a long-controversial policy that doomed a wolf after his or her third confirmed livestock kill. Environmentalists say the policy resulted in 66 wolves being killed or removed from the wild - and they say careless ranching practices led wolves to kill cattle.

The three-strikes policy was ended as part of a settlement of a lawsuit by a coalition of environmental groups. In addition, the settlement makes it clear that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has the final authority over wolf recovery, not a committee of agencies that was formed after the reintroduction effort began.

Dumping the odious three-strikes rule was necessary. Clarifying the chain

of command was also important because environmentalists raised troubling questions about whether the committee was too easily influenced by local ranchers.

This is not a local issue. The preservation of species diversity is a national goal reflected in the federal Endangered Species Act. It has significance well beyond the perceived or real inconveniences wolves cause public-land ranchers.

Ranchers who lease public land for grazing do not have a right to monopolize the land or limit its other uses or public benefits.

It is important to keep that in mind as the wolf-recovery program is improved. It is also important to remember that this program is not a failure.

The wolves are there, surviving in that wintry forest, despite challenges. They will begin to thrive if wildlife managers honor our national commitment to this endangered creature.