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## Mexican Gray Wolves to Be Spared, Despite Cow Deaths

**By Rene Romo**

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LAS CRUCES — For the third time in less than two weeks, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has decided to allow wolves responsible for a series of cow kills in the Gila National Forest to remain in the wild.

In a decision issued Thursday, Brian Millsap, deputy regional director for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, said the Middle Fork Pack, which includes four pups, would remain in the wild until at least Nov. 1, although the pack's alpha wolves have killed at least seven cattle in the last two months. A policy developed for the Mexican gray wolf reintroduction program allows federal officials to remove wolves that have killed three cattle in a one-year period. The policy was amended in May to allow federal officials to suspend the rule in to take other factors into consideration, such as the status of the wild wolf population.

Regional Director Benjamin Tuggle previously cited the genetic value of the Middle Fork pack alpha wolves and concerns about the lack of growth of the wild wolf population in recent years in deciding Aug. 28 not to trap or kill the wolves despite a spike in cattle kills. The decision was reaffirmed Sept. 4 after a sixth cow kill was confirmed.

The cows are owned by Mexican businessman Eloy Vallina, who operates the Adobe and Slash ranches, which stretch over hundreds of thousands of acres. Vallina runs other cattle operations in Chihuahua, Mexico, and owns thousands of acres on the west side of Ciudad Juarez.

The nonprofit conservation group Defenders of Wildlife has offered to compensate the rancher for the loss of the cattle attributed to the Middle Fork Pack, according to the FWS decision.

Federal and state employees have been aggressively hazing the Middle Fork Pack for several weeks in an effort to drive the wolves away from the cattle operation.

But Laura Schneberger, president of the Gila Livestock Growers Association, said the effort is "for show" and has failed to stop wolves from killing cattle. Schneberger said the noisy hazing operations have also disrupted some elk hunts.

Michael Robinson of the Center of Biological Diversity said he was pleased by the decision to "spare" the wolves, noting that there are an estimated 52 Mexican gray wolves in the wild and that federal officials had projected 102 by 2006.