

Friday, January 26, 2007

Gray Wolf Numbers Rising

By Tania Soussan

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There are an estimated 59 endangered Mexican gray wolves in the wild now, enough to allow public lands ranchers to kill problem wolves in some circumstances.

The wolf reintroduction field team used ground, helicopter and fixed-wing airplane surveys to count 49 wolves and then identified another 10 from tracks, scat and other signs this month.

That's an increase from 35 to 49 wolves counted a year ago but still far below the eight-year-old program's original goal of having 102 lobos in the wild by now.

"It doesn't match up, but we're still actually pretty pleased with the numbers," said U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service spokeswoman Elizabeth Slown.

The program aims to re-establish a population of wolves in southwestern New Mexico and southeastern Arizona.

Meanwhile, the program team has tried to catch an alpha male wolf that killed a Gila family's horse earlier this month.

The wolf population count identified 22 wolves in five packs and four lone wolves in New Mexico.

The field team also counted a total of seven breeding pairs. That's enough to allow the Fish and Wildlife Service for the first time to issue permits to ranchers to kill problem wolves attacking livestock on public land.

The permits would be valid only on grazing allotments where wolves have previously injured or killed livestock.

Until now, ranchers have been allowed to shoot wolves attacking livestock only on private land.

The new flexibility won't be much help to ranchers dealing with aggressive wolves, said New Mexico Farm and Livestock Bureau spokesman Erik Ness.

"By the time it's attacking their livestock, it's a little late," he said.

Craig Miller of Defenders of Wildlife said the group is encouraged to see the wolf population growing but worried about what it will mean.

"We're deeply concerned their recent success will lead to higher levels of killing and control," he said.

"That's something that has repeatedly plagued this program from the beginning."

Michael Robinson of the Center for Biological Diversity agreed and questioned whether there really are seven breeding pairs. The male in one of the pairs counted is not the father of the pups; he was taken by the female after her original mate died last year.

"The devil is in the details," **Robinson said**. "By claiming there are seven pairs of wolves, the agency is rolling out the red carpet for livestock owners who want to slaughter wolves later this year."

The program rules allow ranchers to kill wolves on public lands when there are six or more breeding pairs.

Robinson said claiming an extra pair gives the government the ability to lose one pair and still allow public lands killings.

He also criticized the field team's efforts to capture the alpha male from the Aspen Pack after it killed a horse on The Link Ranch earlier this month.

"They're going after every wolf they possibly can under every excuse they can muster," **Robinson said**.

The same wolf is responsible for killing a family dog on the same ranch in the Gila last year.

The Miller family was given a radio receiver to monitor wolves coming close to their ranch, and the field team made three unsuccessful attempts to catch the wolf from a helicopter.

Trapping is not safe or practical in cold weather, so the team has focused on close monitoring and aggressive hazing.

Mary Miller said the wolf is "absolutely fearless," shows up at her house frequently and should be removed.

"That horse had been run into the corral and cornered," Miller said. "Our front yard was covered with wolf tracks, and there was scat a foot from our front door."

The incident prompted Rep. Steve Pearce, R-N.M., to write a letter to other members of Congress on Monday, asking them to examine the wolf program.

"The Fish and Wildlife Service has failed to control this wolf pack from preying on cattle, on pets, and now the pack has moved on to horses," he wrote. "The fear is that this pattern of habituation and escalating level of violence will lead directly to an attack on a child."