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Feds: Killings hamper Mexican wolf population

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ALBUQUERQUE, N.M.—The Fish and Wildlife Service said Friday an effort to reintroduce endangered Mexican gray wolves to the Southwest is being hampered by illegal killings.

The agency's annual survey shows there were 52 Mexican gray wolves in the wild in New Mexico and Arizona at the end of 2008. That's the same number as last year.

Benjamin Tuggle, director of the agency's Southwest region, said the program's numbers would have increased this year had it not been for the illegal shooting of five wolves and the "suspicious demise" of two others.

"The illegal taking of these wolves is a big concern of ours," Tuggle said.

The agency is investigating the illegal wolf deaths. Federal prosecutors are close to bringing charges in at least one case, but Tuggle declined to release further details.

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

Biologists had hoped to have at least 100 wolves in the wild by now and 18 breed-

ing pairs.

According to the survey, seven of the 10 wolf packs scattered between New Mexico and Arizona produced a total of 18 pups in 2008. However, the survey only recognized two breeding pairs because mates in two packs had died and three packs had only a single offspring survive until the end of the year.

"I'm very disappointed in the fact that we only have two breeding pairs," Tuggle said. "There is no question that we have to do a better job of trying to keep wolves in the landscape and try to get into situations where pack dynamics are stable."

Even though the agency did not remove any wolves last year due to cattle depredation, Tuggle said the illegal killings contributed to the loss of both breeding adults and pups, which are dependent on their parents.

Michael Robinson of the Center for Biological Diversity accused the agency of trying to deflect blame from their own management. He said the agency removed 19 wolves from the wild in 2007 through trapping and shooting. That's nearly three times the number of suspicious wolf deaths in 2008.

"If it was just poachers right now, the wolf population would be able to survive and in fact rebound and increase," Robinson said. "But what the wolves can't take is the combination of poaching and the much more efficient federal predator control program."

Environmentalists have long criticized the reintroduction program, saying the federal government's "heavy-handed" approach has compromised the population. They point to rules that require the Fish and Wildlife Service to remove any wolf that establishes a territory outside of the recovery area and a three-strikes policy on livestock kills.

The agency has already made some changes that allow it to be more flexible when deciding whether to remove wolves from the wild, but Tuggle said the program's environmental impact statement needs to be revamped to ensure that wolf recovery succeeds.

"I think we need to look more to the biology and make determinations about what the wolves are telling us versus what we think we know about wolves," he said. "I think if we have the opportunity to incorporate that into our management strategy then ... I think we're going to get more wolves on the ground."

Dave Holaway, president of the White Mountain Conservation League in Arizona, said he spends a lot of time outdoors and it's hard to spot—much less hear—a wolf in the wild in southeastern Arizona.

"I've been lucky enough to see three wolves over the last several years," he said. "I'd like for my neighbors to have the same opportunity."