

## **ENDANGERED SPECIES: More Mexican gray wolves needed in Southwest reintroduction -- FWS (01/12/2009)**

**Patrick Reis, E&E reporter**

A federal effort to reintroduce Mexican gray wolves in the southwestern United States should include more wolves to improve its chances for success, according to a new Fish and Wildlife Service report.

The current wolf recovery plan calls for at least 100 wolves, but the service's draft conservation assessment says that number "does not achieve resiliency, redundancy or representation" -- three criteria for species recovery.

"Any population ecologist would tell you that 100 is not near enough," said John Slown, the service's chief Mexican wolf planner in the Southwest. Also, he said, a successful recovery plan must allow wolves more room to roam; the effort is limited to parts of two national forests in New Mexico and Arizona.

A conservation assessment does not carry regulatory authority, nor does it make official recommendations. It is meant to gather the best available science on which to base a future recovery plan. The service released the assessment Friday.

The current plan, which was written in 1982, has drawn fire from environmentalists for repeatedly failing to meet its goals, as well as for revisions that allow for killing or capturing wolves that have repeated contact with livestock. The service released Mexican gray wolves into Arizona and New Mexico in 1998 in hopes of building the 100-member population by 2007. There are now about 50 wolves in the region.

The 1982 plan was being revised in 2005 when the service suspended the process, claiming it lacked the legal standing to move forward until legal disputes over the status of gray wolves in the northern Rocky Mountains and Great Lakes area were resolved. Disputes in those areas are likely to continue, as environmental groups have threatened to sue if FWS tries to remove the wolves from the endangered species list.

Environmental groups say the problem is not a lack of legal standing but a lack of political will. "This [report] is the latest in a series of paperwork to try and delay actual changes in the Mexican wolf program that scientists have recommended," said Michael Robinson of the Center for Biological Diversity.

Robinson accused the service of sabotaging its own project because of pressure from the livestock industry. "If your goal is to keep the population as low as possible, 50 animals is pretty close to

extinction," he said. "This is a self-exculpatory and self-congratulatory document. Here we have an animal that is at 50 members in the wild ... and [the report] says that things really aren't that bad."

Mexican gray wolves in Arizona and New Mexico are currently designated as an "experimental, nonessential population," giving them less protection than wolves in the northern Rockies or Great Lakes regions. Robinson said that until Mexican gray wolves are given the same protection as those given full protection, recovery will not happen.

The Arizona Cattle Growers' Association and the New Mexico Cattle Growers' Association did not return phone calls requesting comment.

Sloan suggested establishing a private or public fund to pay ranchers pre-emptively for any lost cattle and to help them establish techniques to keep wolves away from cattle. Such a program "could go a long way toward getting tolerance from the ranching community," he said. "Among ranchers, I think tolerance [of wolves] is the most that can be hoped for."