

'06 was a tough year for wolf program

13 in reintroduction plan are dead, but officials point to rising numbers

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When a lone wolf was shot dead the day before Thanksgiving in New Mexico, he became the fifth to be killed this year under the long-standing procedures of the Mexican Wolf Reintroduction Program.

The problem: The wolves killed cattle.

Two others were removed from the wild earlier in the year for killing cows and later died, and six wolf pups subsequently died when they were rejected by a surrogate parent.

The death toll of 13, not counting wolves that died for other reasons, makes 2006 one of the worst years ever for the 8-year-old program, which is attempting to restore wolves to their historic range in eastern Arizona and western New Mexico.

Environmentalists watching the progress of the program say the deaths signal a serious and possibly fatal loophole in the program. But to wildlife managers, the animals' deaths are a necessary price to pay for the program's long-term success.

"Were there setbacks? Yes," said John Morgart, recovery coordinator for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "Was there a fatal setback? No."

But the **Center for Biological Diversity** filed a lawsuit on Thursday, arguing that if changes are not made soon, the wolves are doomed.

Among the changes the lawsuit demands: freedom to release animals in New Mexico, enabling wolves to move outside the initial boundaries set up for the program, and requiring ranchers to render dead cattle inedible.

David Parsons, Morgart's predecessor with the Fish and Wildlife Service, said the agency "is systematically undermining recovery of the Mexican wolf."

"Anti-wolf politics have been controlling agency decisions and actions to the detriment of wolf recovery," he said.

Those currently involved with the wolf project say things are not all that bad.

The annual population count will be taken at the end of December, Morgart said. The last count estimated a minimum 35 to 44 wolves living in the wild.

Four new releases of animals that had never been in the wild took place this year, and possibly two dozen pups were born.

But at least 23 wolves were taken out of the wild, and at least 18 died for a variety of reasons, including natural causes, auto accidents and lethal control, the name given to gunning down problem wolves.

On the positive side, for only the second time in the program's history, no wolves were killed illegally.

"We don't like having to kill wolves," Morgart said. "But to get buy-in from those affected, we have to implement these procedures."

Those affected are ranchers who have been in business for generations. They frequently clash with environmentalists, and some of them have strongly resisted the wolf recovery effort.

Michael Robinson of the Center for Biological Diversity says the occasional killing of a cow by a wolf is a small price to pay to restore to nature one of its top predators, and he worries that some ranchers may be purposely baiting wolves.

"The policy is working at odds with its intended effect," **he said.**

He said wolves typically do not attack live cattle unless other prey is absent. But wolves can develop a taste for cattle, usually from scavenging on dead cows. Once that happens, **Robinson argues**, the likelihood wolves will attack livestock increases.

Morgart points out that through 2003, even with lethal control of wolves that killed cattle, the program was on track with the goals it set

when the program started.

But in 2003, seven wolves were killed illegally, and four were hit by cars and died. That set population numbers back, and since then, numbers have declined every year.

Terry Johnson of Arizona Game & Fish, who leads the interagency group working on wolf recovery, said he believes the count in late December will show population growth in spite of the deaths.

"Just a few weeks ago we estimated 51 to 58 wolves in the wild, up from the 35 to 44 we counted at the end of last year," he said.

In addition, subsequent reports from the White Mountain Apache Tribe and deer and elk hunters indicate another dozen uncoun ted wolves may be active, bring the total to 60 or 70.

"If so, that is a good number compared to the population in '04-'05," the low point after several years of population growth, Johnson said. "Just not compared to the control actions that took place this year."

Still, he says that if lethal controls satisfy the concerns of ranchers, population numbers could be even better next year, and new programs aimed at resolving the conflict between ranchers and wolves could gain support.

One such proposal would be to reduce grazing fees in the wolf-recovery area and do away with compensation for individual animals that are killed. Such a move would signal greater acceptance by the ranching community for the wolf program, Johnson said.

But Robinson points out that the population number originally was projected to surpass 100 this year.

"Most likely it will be less than half that number," he said.

He said ranchers ought to be required to remove or render inedible the carcasses of animals that die of non-wolf causes. Such carcasses habituate wolves to livestock, he said, and is exactly what happened to the most recent wolf that was killed.

"If the Mexican wolf was provided the same protection from livestock carcasses as wolves in the northern Rockies receive, conflicts with ranchers could be prevented," he said. "The Fish and Wildlife Service is mismanaging the Mexican wolf toward extinction."

Mexican wolves, which once roamed the Sierra Madre range of Mexico through the Sky Islands border region of southeastern Arizona and southwestern New Mexico, were nearly wiped out in the early 1930s because of their threat to ranchers.

The last remaining wolves in Mexico provided the breeding stock for the current program.