

Fish and Wildlife Finishes Counting Mexican Gray Wolves

BY SUE MAJOR HOLMES
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Fifty-two Mexican gray wolves are roaming southwestern New Mexico and southeastern Arizona — seven fewer than last year, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's just completed annual count of the animals.

The survey, released Thursday, counted 29 wolves in Arizona and 23 in New Mexico.

Environmentalists said Fish and Wildlife has not done enough to protect the wolves and increase their numbers. On the other hand, the manager of Catron County, home to many of the wolves in New Mexico, said he believes the count is low.

Counts are done each January. In 2007, the survey found 59 wolves, about half in each state.

The federal program removed 22 wolves from the wild in 2007 — 19 of them either for killing livestock or because they were young pups associated with a parent wolf that killed livestock. Two were removed for moving outside the wolves' designated range, and the other was removed for "nuisance behavior," Fish and Wildlife said.

In addition, three wolves disappeared in November from the Gila National Forest of southwestern New Mexico. The agency is investigating the disappearance of the alpha pair of the Durango pack and a pup.

Fish and Wildlife had removed 18 wolves from the wild in 2006.

Federal biologists began releasing wolves in the area in 1998 to re-establish the endangered species in part of its historic range after it had been hunted to the brink of extinction in the early 1900s.

Wolf reintroduction program officials had predicted that by now, there would be a self-sustaining wild population of 100 wolves and 18 breeding pairs.

Ranchers consistently have complained about wolves killing their livestock, particularly cattle, while conservationists have criticized the program's management — specifically a policy that requires the permanent removal of any wolf found to have killed livestock three times within a year.

Catron County Manager Bill Aymar questioned the latest census, saying ranchers and others in the rural county "see uncollared wolves all over the place."

He said no one independently verifies Fish and Wildlife's numbers.

"There's nobody doing any quality control on their count; there's nobody doing the count except them," he said.

The wolf reintroduction program "is a miserable failure and they're trying to do what they can to shore the whole thing up," Aymar said. "They say the population is decreasing, and what the answer is, is put more wolves in there. It's not decreasing but they're going to put more wolves in there anyway."

Environmentalists, on the other hand, criticized the agency for how it operates the program, particularly for removing wolves.

"It's an ongoing population decline," said Michael Robinson of the Center for Biological Diversity. "Three of the last four years, the number of wolves has gone down."

He blamed the agency's "aggressive predator control program" that captures or kills wolves after three livestock kills.

Particularly worrisome, Robinson said, is a decline in the number of breeding pairs. Last year, the federal agency listed six breeding pairs. This year, it listed four, but Robinson said

one of those pairs doesn't meet the agency's own definition of a breeding pair.

Fish and Wildlife Regional Director Benjamin Tuggle said the number of wolves removed last year demonstrates the need for a program that addresses the issue of wolves that kill livestock by compensating ranchers, thus allowing wolves to remain in the wild.

This year's survey used fixed-wing aircraft to locate wolf packs that included individual wolves that had been fitted with radio collars in the past. Then the survey used a helicopter to count uncollared wolves in packs with collared wolves.

Ten wolves captured with net guns and tranquilizer drugs during the census were examined and inoculated for rabies and other diseases to protect

humans and domestic animals in the wolf recovery range, the agency said.