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Suspend Wolf 'Three Strike' Rule, Governor Says

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Gov. Bill Richardson is calling for the suspension of a policy that requires federal wildlife officials to trap or shoot to death any endangered Mexican gray wolf that kills three head of livestock in a year.

The governor's request for a moratorium comes a day after the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service shot and killed a female wolf that had been released April 25 in Catron County.

The wolf, AF924 for alpha female 924, had "two strikes" against it for killing livestock elsewhere before it was relocated to the southwestern New Mexico county and released there over the objections of county officials. The wolf killed a cow and calf last weekend, subjecting it to the three strikes rule.

The governor said the killing of the wolf is a setback to a program that began in 1998 to release endangered Mexican gray wolves in Arizona and New Mexico. He wants the federal government to stop shooting or otherwise permanently removing wolves from the wild until the program's rules can be overhauled.

Spokeswomen for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which is in charge of wolf reintroduction, could not be reached for comment Friday.

Environmentalists have objected for years to the three strikes provision,

called Standard Operating Procedure 13. Increasing numbers of wolves have been removed — either by trapping and permanent captivity or by shooting — for killing livestock since 2004.

Michael Robinson, conservation advocate for the Center for Biological Diversity in Pinos Altos, said the center supports Richardson's call for suspending and reforming the federal rule.

"This wolf killing is a blatant abuse of federal power. It is undermining the recovery of the gray wolf, and is just the latest in a string of attacks on endangered species by the Bush administration," he said.

John Horning, executive director of Forest Guardians in Santa Fe, said he heard the governor's request with "a sigh of relief and a good measure of gratitude." Horning said he'd been hoping someone would stand up against what he called a massacre of wolves.

The governor's request did not meet with universal support.

Catron County Manager Bill Aymar said that "perhaps we should call them the 'standard operating suggestions,'" and likened Richardson's request to changing the rules in the middle of a game.

"The game is tied; the visiting team, while trying to execute a play developed by 17 coaches in faraway somewhere,

fumbles on their own 2-yard line and the ball is recovered by the home team," he said. "Ten seconds left to play and the visiting team calls a time out, and has the rules — been there forever — changed, in fact suspends all the rules, picks up the ball, declares themselves champs, and head off into the Western sunset."

Richardson said the federal government initiated its attempt to kill AF924 without adequate notification to the state.

"I strongly support the effective recovery of endangered Mexican wolves in the Southwest, done in a responsible and sensitive way," he said. "Changes must be made to the protocol for the wolf reintroduction program."

The government has killed three wolves this year for cattle kills. Last year, it shot five wolves for cattle kills and permanently removed three others from the wild. In 2005, one wolf was killed and four put into permanent capture.

Richardson spokesman Gilbert Gallegos said the governor, who is a Democratic presidential hopeful, decided to make the request now because "it was something that had been kind of building up and this most recent incident promoted the governor to act."