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Lagging wolf numbers get a closer look

By Bill Coates

Mexican Gray wolves have had a rough go of it lately, leading wildlife agencies to rethink part of the game plan.

“The last few years have not been good, and our numbers are not growing,” said Terry Johnson, endangered species specialist for Arizona Game and Fish Department. “It’s time to change the game.”

The rules of game — guidelines to be precise — are made by a six-agency group, known as the Adaptive Management Oversight Committee. Johnson chairs the committee, which meets quarterly. At its next meeting, AMOC will see what can be done to get wolf recovery back on track.

Mexican gray wolves had been wiped out in Arizona. In 1998, they were reintroduced to the Blue Range area in eastern Arizona — and allowed to range into western New Mexico. The wolves’ return triggered a political range war between conservation groups and ranchers. Meetings over the wolves have turned rancorous at times. The dispute has spilled over into the courts.

The wolves meanwhile continue to hold their own, but barely. Right

now, the population stands about 50 and has stalled there for a number of reasons, Johnson said.

One includes a recent spate of killings, some possibly unlawful, he said.

The incidents are still under investigation, he said, adding he had little in the way of details.

But the killings, if intentional, seemed to have targeted breeding pairs.

Because of the losses, he said, “it’s very clear to us that we’re not likely to come close to achieving the population growth in this year that we had hoped.”

Other losses include removing wolves legally for killing cattle — or suspected of having done so. A wolf can be trapped or shot if it’s involved in three more incidents of livestock depredation in a year. Ranchers fear AMOC will require proof of a wolf attack if a cow’s found dead.

For now, wolf attacks as a possible cause can be enough to trigger removal, Marks said.

“We’d really like to see that remain in place,” said Barbara Marks, wildlife committee chairman

for the Arizona Cattle Growers’ Association. Marks also runs a ranch with her husband in the Blue Range area.

She gave an example. One of her calves fell from a bluff and was found dead. It looked like she was trying to escape predators, and some other tracks were found nearby. Heavy rain, however, had made the tracks impossible to identify.

Under the proposed change, she said, it would be harder to prove wolf depredation in that case.

But guidelines have always called for confirmation of a wolf kill, Johnson said. That won’t change. Instead, the proposed guidelines would require a more thorough investigation to try and narrow the kill down to a particular wolf or wolves.

But Michael Robinson, conservation advocate for the Center for Biological Diversity, said removing any wolf — when there are so few in number — cuts into a big part of a small gene pool. Ranchers, he said, can do a better job from preventing attacks on livestock to begin with.

“Rather than scapegoating the wolves, try to prevent the conflict from developing,” Robinson said.

Wolves scavenge on livestock left dead on the range, then see cattle as prey, he said. The answer is remove dead cows, he said. He cites the example of a separate wolf-recovery program centered around Yellowstone National Park. Outside the park, ranchers are required to remove or treat carcasses to make them inedible.

Marks, however, disputed Robinson's "prey image" theory. So did Johnson. He said it hasn't been scientifically proven.

In addition, Marks said, there's the logistics of treating a cow carcass, usually with lime, to render it inedible.

"It you happen to find it — that's a big if — you'd have to go home and get the lime, pack it out," she said. "It's not just a five-minute trip. You're talking many hours."

Johnson said there are no plans to require ranchers in Arizona to treat or remove carcasses. But AMOC proposes a change to hold the wolf harmless if its kills a calf put out by a rancher as a "bait" cow. The fear is a rancher would use the killed calf as a reason for the wolf's removal.

In an ideal rancher's world, wolves would not have been reintroduced at all.

But Marks adds, "I guess you have to say, at least for now, we have to find out how to ... live with it."

For Robinson, the wolves are too few and far between. He said the program has been mismanaged, and he faults AMOC. In addition to Arizona Game and Fish, the group includes New Mexico Game and Fish, White Mountain Apache Tribe and three U.S. agencies, including

Fish and Wildlife, Wildlife Services and the Forest Service.

In his criticism, Robison singles out Wildlife Services, part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. It has a predator-control program.

Wildlife Services officers, he said, have shot 11 wolves since 1998.

"There's been a very trigger-happy management philosophy that has imbued this whole reintroduction effort," Robinson said.

In addition, Wildlife Services has trapped dozens more wolves, 18 of which were killed accidentally, he said.

Overall, he added, reintroduction has fallen far short of the goal of 100 wolves set in 1996.

But Johnson said that the reintroduction team had little to go on when coming up with that figure. He was part of that team.

The numbers, he added, "were based on total conjecture."

Ten years into the program, he said, more solid numbers are at hand.

"This is part of that discussion," he said. He wouldn't divulge specific figures in advance of the meeting.

"I can't go down that path right now," he said.

The Adaptive Management Oversight Committee meets 6 p.m. July 30 at the Morenci Club next to Basha's in Morenci Plaza. Comments have already been taken on the proposed changes, but the public can ask questions.

Robinson won't be attending, and Marks is a possible no-show. Marks has an earlier meeting

in Springerville, 113 tortuous mountain miles from Morenci.

Robinson said he gave up on attending AMOC meetings. The agency representatives, he said, show too much deference to ranchers, and not enough to residents who support the wolves.

"There has been a real lack of responsiveness to conservation concerns at these meetings," he said.

The center, he said, has taken its concerns to court. It has joined other conservation groups in suing the U.S. Fish and Wildlife, claiming the agency has dropped the ball on the wolf reintroduction. That case is pending in U.S. District Court in Tucson.

Marks disagreed the meetings have favored the ranchers. She pointed to the fact that the wolves are there and apparently won't be going away any time soon.

Johnson agreed. The wolves are in the Blue Range to stay.

"There is no consideration to giving up or backsliding," Johnson said.