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Richardson Chastises Federal Agency

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Gov. Bill Richardson on Friday called for a temporary suspension of the federal government's "three strikes, you're out" system of dealing with problem Mexican gray wolves—a system that has resulted in the killing of at least eight of the endangered animals.

The Governor's Office in a statement criticized the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for its handling this week of one such problem wolf in southwestern New Mexico's Catron County. The wolf was killed by a federal sharpshooter after repeated livestock depredations.

The statement said the wolf, designated as alpha female 924, was killed before adequate notification was provided to state game officials.

Thursday's killing of AF924 "signals that it is time to re-examine the protocols under which the wolves are removed from the wild," the statement said, adding that Richardson has "called for the immediate suspension of the (system) ... pending these revisions."

Fish and Wildlife Service spokeswoman Elizabeth Slown said an interagency team involved in the wolf program—of which the New Mexico Game and Fish Department is a part—made the call to kill the wolf.

She said Fish and Wildlife regional director Benjamin Tuggle would meet with Richardson or a designee about the governor's concerns. But she defended the protocol for dealing with problem wolves.

"We ... put together that policy as a way to recognize the toll that wolves can take on the ranchers in that area," Slown said. "We very much want wolves out in the wild. (But) we know there will be a burden on ranchers. That was our promise to them."

The Fish and Wildlife Service is chiefly responsible for the program aimed at re-establishing packs of endangered Mexican gray wolves into southwestern New Mexico and southeastern Arizona.

State Game and Fish spokesman Marty Frentzel said the Fish and Wildlife Service in past cases has provided adequate notification before removing a wolf—but didn't in the current case.

"We were hoping to communicate better," Frentzel said.

Slown said that during its annual wolf count early this year, her agency found 59 wolves in the wild. Some of those wolves have since had pups, boosting the total.

AF924 was released into the wild with her mate in late April and whelped a litter of pups—one observer has said she had four of them, Slown said.

But officials last week confirmed that AF924 was involved in a third livestock killing—the first two were last August and November before she was removed from the wild temporarily.

And Fish and Wildlife Service's procedures call for problem wolves to be removed permanently from the wild—either by live-trapping or

shooting—for a third offense within a one-year period.

Slown said shooting AF924 was the best way to deal with the problem.

"It had to do with providing the least disruption to a pack that has wolf pups out there," Slown said. "In wolf packs, the male will take over care of the pups. We didn't want to accidentally trap him."

The Governor's Office statement said the removal of a female wolf that leaves pups with a single parent is a "setback" to the recovery program.

Slown said the pups were weaned before their mother was killed and said the pack should survive without her.

"We're going to help them out by supplementing—feeding them road-killed elk," she said. She added that to her recollection, 16 wolves have been removed for depredation problems in New Mexico and Arizona over the past two years—eight by being trapped and placed in permanent captivity, and eight by being shot.

However, Michael Robinson of the Center for Biological Diversity said the actual number of wolves shot by federal sharpshooters is 11.

He said another 20 wolves have died as a direct result of federal capture operations.