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Environmentalists sue feds over faltering wolf recovery program

PHOENIX -- An environmental group filed suit Tuesday against the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, accusing the agency of not following recommendations to help its recovery program for the endangered Mexican gray wolf.

Conservationists from the **Center for Biological Diversity** said the federal agency is undermining recovery efforts by not following the panel's proposals.

"Governments have ignored critical recommendations presented in the only independent assessment ever conducted regarding the Mexican wolf recovering program _ a set of recommendations that were commissioned by the government," said John Vucetich, a member of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Mexican Gray Wolf Recover team.

In June 2001, Vucetich was part of an independent scientific panel that examined the reintroduction program _ which was designed to restore the wolf population in southern New Mexico and southeastern Arizona. The panel concluded survival and recruitment rates were too low to lead to any improvement in the coming years.

The program calls for permanent removal _ dead or alive _ of any wolf that has been involved in three depredations within a year.

Most recently, a wolf was shot and killed in November in New Mexico's Gila Wilderness because it had killed three animals since June.

The agency began releasing wolves on the Arizona-New Mexico border in 1998 to re-establish the species in part of its historic range. Many ranchers have been vocal opponents of the effort because of livestock depredation.

There are less than 50 wolves now in the wild in the Arizona and New Mexico.

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