

State/feds mum on wolf investigation

by Levi Hill

SUN-NEWS BUREAU CHIEF

CATRON COUNTY — State and federal wildlife agency officers, state police and Catron County officials were tight-lipped Monday about an investigation stemming from last week's lethal removal of the wolf known as Alpha Female 924 of the Durango Pack in Catron County.

Following the lethal take of AF924 on July 5, Gov. Bill Richardson released a statement the next day calling for a change in the Wolf Recovery Program's policy that allows for the trapping or lethal take of a wolf after three livestock depredations in one year.

The governor, in a news release, called the killing of AF924 a setback in the program and said an investigation into the incident was being conducted by state police. According to state police officials Monday, the investigation is separate from the governor's call to review the program's policies.

"Related to the killing, there was a do-not-kill order issued by state Game and Fish," said State Police spokesman Peter Olson. "In the attempt of a Game and Fish employee to serve the order to Wildlife Services personnel, there was an altercation of some kind and the state employee felt threatened."

Olson said he had few details about the investigation and it was unclear if the Game and Fish employee was threatened by federal officials, land owners in the area or other persons.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife officials made no comment on the investigation Monday, but said the recovery program's protocols are slated to be reviewed and a meeting with the governor is planned.

"We appreciate the governor's concern and input," said Charna Lefton, spokeswoman for U.S. Fish and Wildlife. "Internally, we were already discussing that it had been 10 years since the standard operating procedures were developed and it is time for the Adaptive Management Oversight Committee to look at those again and see what is working for us and what isn't."

She said the agency is seeking a meeting with Richardson, although his office has not responded with a possible meeting date yet.

Marty Frentzel, chief of Information and Outreach for New Mexico Game and Fish, said the agency does not comment on investigations and could not confirm or deny an investigation was under way. He did, however, confirm that a hold on the removal order, which was issued by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services, was filed.

"The state of New Mexico did request a brief, temporary hold on the removal order to ensure adequate communication regarding circumstances leading to the issuing of the removal order," he said. "Fish and Wildlife Services had approved the temporary hold."

"We are a partner in a team that is struggling to reintroduce a top predator into an ecosystem," Frentzel added. "This is a team effort and as a team member, we expect our concerns to be heard and given a fair evaluation."

Catron County Manager Bill Aymar confirmed that Catron County Sheriff's Department investigators are conducting an investigation into the lethal removal of AF924. Aymar, however, said he could not comment on the details of the investigation.

"We are going to make sure the investigation is very thorough," he said. "Our sheriff is not going to jump the gun like the governor did. We need to be very, very sure of what we say because there are so many people putting half-truths out there."

Aymar said that had federal and state officials listened to the county before releasing AF924 into the wild on April 25, this entire incident would have been avoided.

"How many times in the last few months did the county tell the feds

this is bad idea and nothing good would come of it," he said of AF924's release.

He said the county filed three letters with U.S. Fish and Wildlife and New Mexico Game and Fish asking the wolf not be released and then that she be captured and humanely removed.

"Now that the program is being shown for the miserable failure that it is, rather than address that, certain groups are getting the governor involved and they are trying to change the rules," he said of the governor's call to change the three-strike rule. "Are there really any rules or not?"

Those on both sides of the wolf recovery issue continued to divide further Monday in the wake of the governor's statements.

"What is sad is that the governor is being fed some bad information," said Laura Schneberger, a Sierra County resident and part-owner of a blog about the wolf program.

Schneberger said state and federal officials have maintained that AF924, who was expected to whelp shortly after her April 25 release, still had puppies.

She said AF924 was seen 40 miles from where she was released just 10 days after her release. She said AF924 and Alpha Male 973, abandoned the pups soon after birth.

"It happens very often when they have their first litter," she said. "These wolves don't want to be in the wilderness. Their instinct tells them to go back to where they can make a living."

Schneberger said AF924 was seen daily around ranches in Catron county over the past two months, while a

female wolf in the Aspen pack that also whelped this summer stayed with the pups and was not seen on radio collar tracking equipment for nearly a month.

"I know people who were there when 924 was killed, and she was dry as a bone. There is no evidence at all that she still had pups," Schneberger said.

Supporters of the program, however, are backing the governor's input and supporting a revision to the three-strike rule.

"The greatest threat to the Mexican gray wolf today is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service," said Michael Robinson of the Center for Biological Diversity. "The Bush administration has turned the agency into a wolf-killing machine. No wolves were shot by government agents until 2003; killings escalated to five in 2006 and are already at three this year. 2007 is on a trajectory to become another record killing year."

Robinson, in a news release, cited a letter from biologist David R. Parsons and other scientists to U.S. Fish and Wildlife warning that legal takes are undermining the recovery program.

The letter cites numerous removals and mysterious disappearances of wolves in the recovery area and asks for actions to be taken to increase the wolf populations in the Blue Range recovery area.

"I and the prominent scientists who have endorsed this letter urge the USFWS to take immediate actions that will result in at least a 15 percent annual growth rate of the wild population until the objective of at least 100 wolves is met and to expedite management actions necessary

to protect and maximize the genetic diversity of the wild population," Parsons' letter reads. "We implore the USFWS to make full use of the management flexibility accorded by current regulations to protect and conserve Mexican wolves in the wild, to expedite the process of revising the Mexican Wolf Recovery Plan (now 25 years old), and to expedite a rule change that will meet the "conservation" mandate of the Endangered Species Act."

Schneberger and others, however, say the true threat to the program is not the removal of problem wolves.

"I have seen uncollared wolves," she said. "Uncollared means unvaccinated and we have an outbreak of rabies in Catron County. That is going to destroy the program, not the destroying of collared problem wolves."