

ARIZONA REPUBLIC

Author: Shaun McKinnon

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Mexican wolf population stagnant, killings on the rise

The number of [Mexican gray wolves](#) living in **Arizona** and **New Mexico** stayed stagnant in 2008, but just two breeding pairs survive 11 years after the endangered species was reintroduced to the wilds.

The [U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service](#) counted 52 wolves in the study areas that straddle the two states. That's the same number found at the end of 2007. The agency said the packs have suffered an increase in illegal killings, leaving fewer adults able to reproduce.

"The illegal taking of these wolves is a big concern of ours," said **Benjamin Tuggle**, southwest regional director for the wildlife service. "We are disappointed in the fact that we only have two breeding pairs ... but I don't accept the premise that the program is failing."

The number of breeding pairs -- a male and female adult that reproduce at least two pups and survive to raise them through their first year -- is seen as a measure of the overall health of the population. Without strong breeding pairs, pups can suffer higher mortality rates.



Michael Robinson, a conservation advocate for the Tucson-based [Center for Biological Diversity](#), traces the stagnant population to the government's forced removal of 19 wolves in 2007. The agency removed no wolves permanently in 2008.



"The wolves themselves are doing everything right," Robinson said. "The problem has indeed been with the program. It has been premised on the notion that the best way to recover wolves is to put bullets in them."

Robinson wants to see a moratorium on shooting and trapping the wolves to give the government time to craft a science-based recovery plan.

"Wolves are intelligent, family-oriented animals," Robinson said. "Trapping and shooting them disrupts their packs, separates mated pairs and can leave pups without parents."

The original plan to rebuild the wolf population projected a total of 18 breeding pairs and more than 100 wolves by the end of 2006.

"It's now or never," said **Billie Hughes**, a member of the [White](#)

[Mountain Conservation League](#) in the eastern Arizona town of **Nutrioso**. "Mexican gray wolves belong in the wilds of the Southwest and we need to explore new ways of managing them to ensure they fully recover."

Tuggle said he supports changes to the recovery program and wants to see science play a greater role in his agency's decision-making.

"We're not satisfied with those numbers," he said. "This year, we had a different set of elements. We didn't remove any wolves at all, but we had a lot of illegal killings that contributed to the loss."

Five wolves were illegally shot in 2008. Two more were struck and killed by vehicles, two died from natural causes and nine from unknown causes. Two more await examination.

When a strong male or female is killed or dies, that can affect the viability of pups, Tuggle said. In one instance last year, a female was killed and the male was able to take care of the pups, "but there's no guarantee you're going to have that kind of survival."

