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## ECOHearth

### Government's Bold Decision in Favor of Mexican Wolves

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Traveling miles and miles on dusty, rutted excuses for roads. Incessant wind blowing dust into every crevice in your camp—not to mention your eyes, nose and mouth. Inhospitable local residents who wish you'd go away and let them handle the problem "their way." All-nighters sitting upright in a pickup truck listening to classic country music on AM radio while waiting expectantly to hear the beep that signals the approach of a radio-collared wolf, but dreading the sound of it because that means you have failed in your mission so far.

This is the life of a team of wolf biologists as they try to dissuade a pack of wolves from preying on cattle as a way of feeding their new pups. I can relate to the plight of these biologists because I was in exactly the same place, doing almost exactly the same thing back in 2001.

I can tell you from experience that it is disheartening work, trying to keep wolves away from a place where they want to be. But a little backstory is called for here. The wolves in question are the Middle Fork pack—a pair of adult wolves and about four pups born earlier this year. They have turned into a nightmare for the folks who manage the struggling population of Mexican wolves in Arizona and New Mexico. Both adults are missing a paw as a result of past run-ins with people. Whether because of these disabilities, which could keep them from effectively hunting elk, or some other reason known only to them, the Middle Fork pack has turned into a pack of cattle killers. According to the latest monthly wolf management report, the wolves are responsible for ten attacks on cows in the past year—far more than any other wolf pack has been allowed to commit.

Normally, if a wolf is implicated in three cattle depredations in a single year, that wolf is removed from the population, either by trapping or lethal means. At least 35 wolves have been removed in the past decade, leaving a current population estimated at only 55 or so. To their immense credit, the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and New Mexico Game and Fish Department have decided to draw a line in the sand over the Middle Fork pack. Several times over the past six weeks, Benjamin Tuggle, the Regional Director of USFWS, has repeated and reaffirmed that due to low population numbers overall and the genetic value of these wolves in particular, the Middle Fork pack will not be removed from the wild while they are raising their pups.

Instead of removing the wolves, Director Tuggle has instructed his field team to intensively haze the wolves to try to get them to move out of the area (meaning chase, scare, disturb and anything

else they can think of to convince them to move somewhere else). The wolves are on the edge of the Gila National Forest, where they are allowed to be. Unfortunately, they often cross the barbed-wire fence that marks the arbitrary (to wolves) boundary of private land belonging to the Adobe and Slash Ranches.

No government biologist has spoken publicly about the Adobe and Slash Ranches' lack of cooperation over wolf management, nor could they due to political considerations. But the staff and management of these ranches (owned and run by a single individual) have a long history of both active interference with the wolf project and a lack of effort to avoid problems with wolves. For example, the Center for Biological Diversity documented 16 dead cattle left for scavengers in the same area where many of the attacks took place, potentially luring wolves to prey on live cattle. (See my blog entry, [Mom's Wisdom Could Save Mexican Wolves](#) for more background on this issue.)

Director Tuggle's bold move is enough to leave breathless any conservation-minded follower of Mexican wolf recovery. Not since the original decision to return the nearly extinct wolves to their historic range has the government acted so decisively in their favor over the interests of the livestock industry. (Could it have something to do with the change in leadership in Washington, DC?)

The directive that has so far spared the Middle Fork pack expires in November. Until then, a ragtag team of professional biologists and volunteers will spend their days and nights in a futile effort to make the wolves move elsewhere. Unfortunately, this pair of three-legged wolves have hit upon a strategy that works for them and I don't think any amount of hazing will convince them to give it up. Instead, the real value in what the field-team members will be doing is showing a modicum of good faith to the ranching community in the face of a difficult decision to put the needs of an endangered species over cows, and even over the almighty dollar.

My hat is off to USFWS Regional Director Tuggle and New Mexico Game and Fish Director Tod Stevenson for their brave decision and to the field crew who actually has to be out there doing the work. Hopefully this victory for wolves, however temporary, is enough to make the sand between their teeth worth it.