

Ranchers, environmentalists agree wolf reintroduction flops

Review of program rekindles debate on animals' future

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RESERVE, N.M.

Ranchers and environmentalists agree on one thing when it comes to Mexican gray wolves: The program to reintroduce them is not working.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is considering biologists' recommendations in a five-year review of the program, which promises to spark a renewed debate on the future of the endangered wolves.

State and federal biologists who worked on the five-year review say the wolves should be free to set up territories outside the current boundaries in the Southwest. Environmentalists agree.

"This program is in deep trouble the way it's being run now," said Michael Robinson of the Center for Biological Diversity in Tucson. "We may be looking at the second extermination of the Mexican gray wolf. It's that bad."

Changes are needed to increase the wild wolf population and give the endangered animals a better shot at survival, environmentalists say.

Ranchers argue the program needs to get tougher on wolves that kill livestock.

Because of ranchers' concerns, a one-year ban on some new wolf releases has been proposed.

Laura Schneberger, president of the Gila Livestock Growers Association, said the program team must do more

to control wolves and help ranchers.

"At stake is the very survival of the livestock industry in this part of the state," she said. "We won't survive if they're allowed to continue the status quo."

A series of public meetings to discuss the wolf reintroduction program starts Wednesday in Reserve. Meetings will continue Thursday in Bayard, Friday in Truth or Consequences and Saturday in Albuquerque.

Mexican gray wolves were pushed to the brink of extinction by federal eradication efforts in the early to mid-1900s.

Captive breeding and the reintroduction program straddling the New Mexico-Arizona border and run by federal, state and tribal governments are the cornerstones of an effort to restore the wolves.

The Fish and Wildlife Service has not moved forward on any of the changes recommended by scientists, but has proposed restrictions on wolf releases at the request of ranchers.

The proposal says that for one year, no captive-bred wolves without experience in the wild would be let loose and wolves that had killed livestock would not be moved from one state or Indian reservation to another.

Environmentalists say such restrictions would jeopardize the recovery of the wolves.

Ranchers say slowing down releases

would give the program time to get a better handle on the number of wolves in the wild.

A study by Industrial Economics Inc. based in Cambridge, Mass., and Berven, Harp & Associates shows from 37 to 245 cattle, sheep, horses and dogs were killed by wolves in New Mexico and Arizona from 1998 to 2004.