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## Ranchers, environmentalists differ on wolf reintroduction program

RESERVE, N.M. (AP) - 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, Ariz. "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 live-

stock 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 has compiled the number of livestock killings based on government sources and ranchers.

The study shows that anywhere from 37 to 245 cattle, sheep, horses and dogs were killed by wolves in New Mexico and Arizona from 1998 to 2004.

The economic impact ranges from \$38,650 to \$206,290, which includes the market value of the animals and the cost of preparing each claim for compensation.

But a conservation group that has paid ranchers \$33,000 for lost livestock since 1998, said all ranchers have to do is send in a report prepared by the government, said Craig Miller of Defenders of Wildlife in Tucson, Ariz.

Even using the high estimate of losses provided by ranchers, wolves killed only about a quarter of 1 percent of the 34,800 cattle in the area in 2002, the year with the most killings.

The study also tried to measure the wolf reintroduction program's value.

In addition to program jobs and tourism benefits, the ecological benefits can be demonstrated by a wolf reintroduction program in Yellowstone National Park.

Wolves there reduced elk populations that had been overgrazing vegetation along streams and rivers. That change, in turn, benefited beavers, bears, foxes and birds.