

---

# SILVER CITY SUN-NEWS

---

April 27, 2006

## Ranchers worry about wolves

---

by Thomas J. Baird  
*SUN-NEWS BUREAU CHIEF*

---

Two endangered Mexican gray wolves were set out in a release pen Tuesday in Sierra County near the Ladder Ranch owned by media mogul Ted Turner.

Alpha female 873 and alpha male 993 are the first of five lobos scheduled for release into the Gila National Forest over the next several months. The male wolf was wild-born and the female was released as a pup from the Wolf Recovery Program managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Both wolves were captured last year and returned to captivity after violating boundary rules of the wolf recovery program, according to officials with the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, who also work with the project.

But at least one area rancher said the wolves should have been removed permanently for depredating cattle in the region last year. Laura Schneberger claims the alpha male in question attacked two pregnant heifers and killed their calves at a neighboring Arizona ranch.

“Had they been counted individually, the animal would not qualify for release,” she said. “Later these same

animals killed another calf on this same ranch. The Fish and Wildlife Service and the interagency field team set high standards for removing depredating wolves and still are having to tweak those standards.”

Michael Robinson, carnivore conservation coordinator for the Center for Biological Diversity in Pinos Altos said the problem was not with the wolves.

“The alpha male was previously trapped from the wild for having crossed out of the recovery area, even though he didn’t prey on livestock,” he said. “The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service does not require the capture of any endangered species in the U.S., except the Mexican wolf, for crossing outside of arbitrary political boundaries.

“Nor does it manage any other animal except the Mexican wolf with rules that only allow wild-captured wolves -- and not those from the captive breeding population -- to be released into one state ( New Mexico), while allowing releases of captive-bred wolves in another state ( Arizona ).”

But the pair of lobos were not yet free as of late Wednesday, said Saleen

Richter, a wolf biologist recently hired by the Game and Fish Department to help facilitate the release of the animals. The wolves had not yet chewed out of their mesh pen.

“We refer to it as a modified soft release,” she said. “A soft release generally would be a pen constructed for us, where the modified release pens are built in the wilderness. It’s a mesh pen and the wolves will sometimes self-release and other times we have to release them.”

Field team members of the Wolf Recovery Program were “pen sitting” Wednesday, she added.

But Schneberger blasted the wolf release team, claiming the penned wolves were without water.

“I predict conflict within days, especially since the agency does not provide water to the wolves in the pens, something we have just learned,” she said. “I imagine that right about now these animals are beginning to suffer their first major thirst and trying to find a way out of those pens.

“Nor do the agency personnel seem to know where the nearest water source will be,” she added. “The allotment has not been stocked for

nearly 15 years, there is no upkeep water there and these animals are likely to beeline it to the nearest place they can find water. That will be a neighbor who has livestock.”

But Richter, who lives and works in Silver City and helped construct the release pen, disputed that claim Wednesday.

“There is water in the pen,” she said. “And if there is a point where there isn’t water, we will bring water to the wolves.”

Richter said once the animals were free, they would have plenty of options for quenching their thirst.

“There is a tank within 50 yards of the pen site and there are other tanks up and down Seco Creek and a variety of water sources out there,” she said.