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## Review Urges More Room for Wolves

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Endangered Mexican gray wolves need more room to roam, government biologists say.

Boundaries for the government wolf reintroduction program along the southern New Mexico-Arizona border are causing too many wolves to be captured, removed from the wild or relocated, according to a new five-year review of the program.

The captures and relocations are tripping up the biological success of the effort to restore a species eradicated from the Southwest more than 50 years ago by livestock interests.

"Present recovery zone boundaries are inadequate and impeding wolf recovery," an inter-agency field team wrote.

The government review also reports that 26 cattle were confirmed killed by wolves from the start of the reintroduction program in 1998 to the end of 2004, but the livestock industry claims the number of kills is much higher.

The review team included members from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the New Mexico and Arizona Game and Fish departments. Its report is part of the broader review and addresses many points debated by ranchers and environmentalists since the first endangered Mexican gray wolves were reintroduced in the Southwest.

The Fish and Wildlife Service, the lead agency in the recovery program, is accepting public comments on the five-year review through March 15.

It will hold four public meetings, including hearings Jan. 26 in Truth or Consequences and Jan. 27 in Glenwood. The review is to be finalized by August.

### Debate on boundaries

Rules for re-establishing the wolf population bar the animals from setting up territories outside the official recovery area boundaries or from being released directly into New Mexico.

The present recovery area encompasses 4.4 million acres of the Gila and Apache Sitgreaves national forests; the 1.6 million acre White Mountain Apache reservation is also used.

There are an estimated 51 to 56 wolves in the wild now.

The field team recommended changing the rule to allow wolves to be in the larger boundaries of what the Fish and Wildlife Service considers the southwestern wolf population area—including all of Arizona and New Mexico and parts of southern Utah, southern Colorado, western Oklahoma, western Texas and Mexico—as long as the wolves do not conflict with livestock or humans.

That's similar to what a panel of independent scientists suggested years ago and to what environmental groups have

advocated.

The New Mexico Farm and Livestock Bureau, on the other hand, is "totally opposed" to expanding wolf recovery areas and doing away with the boundary rule.

The bureau, representing cattle ranchers and other stakeholders in the Gila country of southwestern New Mexico, has long complained about livestock "degradations"—mainly wolves killing cows.

### Wolfpack dynamics

Recapturing wolves that stray outside the recovery program's boundaries is costly and stresses the animals. It sometimes means they are returned to captivity and can disrupt wolfpack dynamics when the wolves are relocated in the wild, causing the packs to split apart.

Environmentalists want wolves that stray outside the recovery area boundaries but that are not causing problems (such as preying on livestock) to be allowed to stay where they are and not be captured.

The wolves are being recaptured much more often than biologists anticipated when they planned the reintroduction program, and 36 percent of the removals are because of the boundary rule, the review found.

The review found that a wolf starting in the geographic center of the recovery area and traveling the average distance

a lone wolf goes would end up outside the recovery area two-thirds of the time.

"As you get more wolves, you get more animals, there's going to be more movement for sure," said field team leader John Oakleaf of the Fish and Wildlife Service.

Changing the boundary rule is critical, said Craig Miller, Southwest director of the environmental group Defenders of Wildlife.

"These arbitrary boundaries, which were drawn to political lines and not biological lines, are creating unnecessary costs and unnecessary conflicts," he said.

### Eyeing more habitat

Defenders of Wildlife believes long-term Mexican gray wolf recovery requires more habitat to support additional populations.

The group thinks several places are suitable, including the Grand Canyon ecoregion, the Sky Islands borderlands on the U.S.-Mexico border and northern Mexico. It said small numbers of wolves could be supported in the Chiricahua Mountains of southern Arizona and the Big Bend area of Texas.

Others think the boundaries are too expansive now.

"This program is holding hostage over 6,800 square miles of land that belongs to the public for what is essentially a political program backed by political groups with radical, anti-American and anti-property-rights agendas," John Wortman, executive vice president of the bureau, said in a statement.

Fish and Wildlife Service Regional Director H. Dale Hall said a decision about changing the boundary limits or other program rules will be made as part of an ongoing revision to the broader Mexican wolf recovery plan.

"We want to move as fast as we can but not recklessly," he said.

Michael Robinson of the Center for Biological Diversity said a change in the

boundary rule is overdue. "They keep saying there's processes in the future that are going to address it," he said. "At some point, the agency's credibility slips."

### Attacks on livestock

The rates of livestock depredations by wolves have been within early predictions, according to the review.

A total of 26 cattle, two dogs, two sheep and one horse were confirmed killed between 1998 and the end of 2003. In addition, there were four other probable and 14 possible depredations.

That's about five livestock or domestic animals a year confirmed killed by wolves.

Defenders of Wildlife has paid ranchers in the Southwest more than \$33,000 from a privately financed compensation fund for animals killed or injured by wolves.

The group has also helped ranchers by hiring local riders to monitor herds during calving season, leasing alternative pastures to move cattle away from wolves and buying deterrent devices to scare wolves away from livestock.

Miller said the depredation rates have been consistent with what was expected and consistent with other parts of the country.

Industry groups dispute the government's numbers.

"They're bound to be higher," said Erik Ness, spokesman for the Farm and Livestock Bureau. "Their numbers are pure speculation."

He said that many livestock killed by wolves are never found and that ranchers are reporting animals missing from their herds at the end of each year.

The industry doesn't have an estimate for the total number of depredations, but it's several times more than the government total and it's an unacceptable burden for ranchers, Ness said.

### Targeting carcasses

Environmentalists think ranchers should be doing more to eliminate the carcasses of livestock dying from causes other than wolves. Robinson said the statistics in the review show that 91 percent of wolves that scavenged on those carcasses went on to kill cattle or other livestock.

The five-year review also found that wolves that had spent more time in the wild before being released had the best chances of success.

Meanwhile, money remains an obstacle for the wolf program.

More than \$7 million was spent on wolf reintroduction and recovery between 1998 and 2004 by the Fish and Wildlife Service and its partners, the review found.

Yet the program suffers from funding and staffing shortfalls, the review says.

"As the number of free-ranging wolves increases, and recovery and delisting are approached, management issues will increase proportionately.

"If those needs go unmet, public dissatisfaction, especially among local residents who are more affected by the project, will inevitably skyrocket."