

Ring Pack alpha male killed

by Thomas J. Baird
Staff Writer

The alpha male Mexican gray wolf of the Ring Pack was shot and killed by U.S. Fish and Wildlife control agents Sunday near the Rainy Mesa Ranch in Catron County, a spokesman for the agency said.

The wolf was targeted with a "lethal take" order by the federal agency for killing three head of cattle on grazing allotments and ranches near Reserve.

Larry Bell, assistant regional director of external affairs for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said Monday that traps were laid June 21 when the lethal take order was issued.

It's been a bad 10 days for wild wolves in New Mexico.

On June 18, the alpha male wolf of the Francisco Pack, which was also targeted with a lethal take order after reportedly killing three to four calves and cows, was caught in a leghold trap set by animal control agents. But the wolf's leg was severely broken in the incident and the limb had to be amputated.

The wolf was returned to the agency's Sevieta refuge. But his fate has not been determined — other than he will never be returned to the wild, Bell added.

"The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is out of control," said Michael Robinson, carnivore conservation coordinator for the Center for Biological Diversity in Pinos Altos. "This is a control program masquerading as a recovery program."

Robinson said the agency, which oversees the Mexican Gray Wolf Reintroduction Program, is using control actions that have now reduced the number of radio collared wolves from 27 to 22 in four years. Robinson also accused the agency of acting on newly proposed cattle depredation thresholds, for issuing lethal take orders that have not been finalized and are still in a public comment period.

Bell acknowledged his agency is operating under the guidelines of proposed changes to the wolf program that have not yet been formalized.

"We still believe it's the best guidance we have," Bell said. "We've received a number of comments from the public and it has been reviewed by the directors of all three agencies involved and the Adaptive Management Oversight Committee."

The other agencies involved are Arizona Fish and Game and New Mexico Game and Fish departments.

Bell said animal control agents will continue to trap the remaining alpha female of the Ring Pack. She also has an indeterminate number of pups that are approaching 12-weeks old. Field agents will attempt to capture the pups, like the four Francisco Pack pups they caught last week.

Those pups were only six weeks old at the time of their capture.

According to Robinson, the alpha female of the Ring Pack is the daughter of the Francisco wolf who lost his leg in a trap in the same region last week.

Bell said it is extremely difficult to shoot wild wolves with tranquilizer darts because of the limited range and poor accuracy of the weapon, thus they resort to traps and lethal shooting.

Although field officers will not try to trap the Ring Pack pups because of their young age, Bell said it is possible they could land in one of the legholds if the animals are heavy enough to set them off.

"Traps aren't discriminatory," Bell said. "But we haven't had that happen and that may be because of the weight."

Bell added that if the Ring Pack female and her pups are captured, they will be returned to captivity. But a final determination on her fate has not yet been made.