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Rural families fear wolf attacks

The Associated Press

RESERVE, N.M. - Families living in an area of the state where wolves have been reintroduced into the wild say they are afraid the wolves will attack a child.

During a recent hearing here on proposed changes to the wolf reintroduction program, Heather Hardy said she watched a wolf chase her family's dog to within 30 feet of her home.

"It was really close, right in my front yard," she said. "It was just the scariest thing ever. It was horrible."

Ty Gatlin is an 8-year-old who has panic attacks about wolves and it too scared to play outside unless his parents are with him.

"I just don't like 'em very much because they kill things," he said.

Wolves have killed livestock on the Gatlin's land.

But wildlife officials say the fears aren't warranted.

In the past 100 years, there have been fewer than 30 documented attacks by wild wolves on humans in North America. Only two people have died - both by contracting rabies from the wolf bites in Alaska in the 1940s, according to reports compiled by scientists.

By comparison, domestic dogs bite 1 million people and kill 16 to 18 people every year in the United States.

There are an estimated 25 black bear attacks a year in North America. One of those attacks is fatal about every three years.

There were 43 attacks by mountain lions between 1981 and 2000. Eight of them were fatal.

Those numbers come from "The Fear of Wolves: A review of wolf attacks on humans," a 2002 scientific report published by the Large Carnivore Initiative for Europe.

"It is now widely accepted by biologists that healthy, wild wolves present little threat to people," Mark McNay wrote in his 2002 report, "A Case History of Wolf-Human Encounters in Alaska and Canada."

Approximately 50 wolves are now living in the wild in southwestern New Mexico and southeastern Arizona as part of the government reintroduction program.

"I personally don't think that in general wolves are a danger," said John Morgart, Mexican wolf recovery coordinator. "For the most part, they see humans as something to fear."

In the seven years that wolves have been released here, none have attacked people, Morgart said.

But some say it will eventually happen.

"It's just a matter of time," said Fred Galley, an Albuquerque resident who

owns the Rainy Mesa Ranch east of Reserve. "We've had some very close encounters."

Under the rules of the reintroduction program, anyone can kill a wolf in defense of a human life.

"How do you think it'll be when a rancher kills a wolf and says, 'He was threatening me'?" asked Don Gatlin, manager of the Rainy Mesa Ranch.

Residents of Catron County say the Mexican gray wolves raised in captivity are more dangerous than those in other parts of North America because they're not scared of people.

"The wolf doesn't run from me like a coyote," Don Gatlin said. "They dang sure ain't going to be scared of a little bitty kid."

Center for Biological Diversity representative Michael Robinson said the danger must be put in perspective.

"There's no reason to be more paranoid about wolves than any other wild animals," he said.