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Opinion

Time to Consider More Habitat for Wolf

A new five-year review of the ambitious but controversial Mexican gray wolf reintroduction program urges an expanded area in which wolves could legally roam.

First, the program is an emerging success story, with roughly 50 wolves in the wild. But there have been setbacks with wolves killed and captured, along with losses to ranchers.

Authors of the latest review estimate that 36 percent of wolf removals are due to the current boundary rule, which calls for the capture and removal of wolves if they stray across a political boundary they can't see. The change would greatly expand the permissible range, from about 6 million acres in New Mexico and Arizona to many times that stretching across six states.

Wolves would still be removed if they cause problems for livestock or people, which is inevitable.

The expansion is strenuously opposed by the New Mexico Farm and Livestock Bureau, which contends that its members have not been appropriately compensated for their losses. They say, for example, that they have the burden of proving that a cow was taken down by wolves.

These are valid concerns federal managers must address if the boundary expansion is to take place. Ranching is hard enough as it is. Drought, disease and competition from mega-ranchers -- not to mention a new predator on the loose -- have made a difficult business more difficult.

There is no shortage of ideas on how to improve the effort to reintroduce Mexican gray wolves or, for that matter, to improve studies on the question.

The decision-makers with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service need to address the concerns and make an effort to move forward with ranchers as their allies.

Doing so could hasten the day that Mexican gray wolves could be delisted from the federal Endangered Species Act. That's a goal both environmentalist and ranchers should be able to rally around.