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OPINION: Time To Revisit Wolf Boundary Restrictions

In the San Mateo Mountains, southwest of Socorro, leg traps are being set for a pair of Mexican gray wolves. It's not because they've developed a taste for beef. In fact, a spokesman for the New Mexico Game and Fish Department has said the two are living off natural prey like deer. And it's not because the wolves have taken to hassling or threatening people. There have been no such reports.

Instead, these wolves are guilty of roaming outside a political boundary they can't see. It's a boundary that program rules require they stay behind.

That's a tall order because wolves naturally roam. But rules are rules. This rule, however, has been heavily scrutinized by both government biologists and independent biologists charged with evaluating the overall health of the wolf recovery effort.

"Present recovery zone boundaries are inadequate and are impeding wolf recovery," an interagency field team concluded as part of a five-year review of the program earlier this year. That was also one of the findings of a distinguished panel of independent scientists in 2001.

Despite these findings, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has yet to propose a federal rule change on the boundaries.

It stands to reason that, as the wild wolf population steadily rises -- as it has -- established packs crowd out newer packs. This has been especially evident on the Arizona side of the recovery zone where wolves are initially released.

When wolves wander outside the permissible territory, they're marked for capture, which has often resulted in injuries, even death, to these critically endangered animals. Packs often split up due to the stress. To date, more than one-third of wolf removals have been due to the current boundary rule.

Fish and Wildlife should follow through on its own experts' recommendations. If wolves become habituated to livestock, or if they threaten humans, they absolutely should be removed to remote wilderness. But as their population grows, the invisible political boundaries also need to expand.