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Agency Plans to Kill Wolf

By Rene Romo

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LAS CRUCES— The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service plans to kill an endangered Mexican gray wolf that is the subject of a Feb. 5 removal order because trapping the animal is too difficult.

A Fish and Wildlife Service permanent removal order means that a targeted animal can be trapped or, failing that, killed.

"In this case, we're actually looking to kill (him) because of the conditions down there," Elizabeth Slown, Fish and Wildlife Service spokeswoman, said Thursday. "Trapping's not really an option because of all the snow."

The 6-year-old alpha male of the San Mateo Pack, designated M796, has been targeted because he was involved in killing three calves between March 15, 2006, and Jan. 31.

The Fish and Wildlife Service reintroduced Mexican gray wolves, which had been hunted to near extinction, in their historic range in southeast Arizona and southwest New Mexico in 1998.

Today, there are about 59 wolves in the recovery area, including seven breeding pairs, Slown said.

Because the wolves are designated a "nonessential, experimental population," federal officials have greater flexibility to manage the endangered animals, including killing wolves involved in three confirmed livestock kills.

The San Mateo Pack consists of four wolves— a mating pair and two pups, Slown said.

Michael Robinson of the Center for Biological Diversity lamented the expected loss of one of the few breeding pairs in the wild "even while the population remains tiny."

A 1996 environmental impact statement completed before Mexican wolves were released projected that by the end of 2006 there would be 102 wolves, including 18 breeding pairs, in the wilderness along the Arizona-New Mexico border.

"This is an ongoing control program masquerading as a recovery program," Robinson said.

Slown said recovery program managers "don't take killing a wolf lightly," but that the San Mateo pack female would find another mate.

Slown said the program could not wait for snow to melt to make trapping the male easier.

"We have a commitment to the ranching community that wolves involved in three or more depredations, we will not keep them out there," she said.

Laura Schneberger, president of the Gila Livestock Growers Association, said she would prefer that the entire San Mateo pack be removed.

"To remove one and expect the others to start lining up is kind of silly," Schneberger said.