

Wolves captured in Arizona returned to New Mexico

by Thomas J. Baird
Staff Writer

Two young Mexican gray wolves have been captured and returned to New Mexico after attacking and killing cattle on a federal grazing allotment in Arizona.

The endangered wolves are part of a federal program managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to reintroduce the animals to southwestern New Mexico and southeastern Arizona.

The 9-month-old male and female from the Aspen pack separated from their parents soon after being released into the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest last summer. Officials said they were doing well, eating deer and elk during the fall and winter.

Meanwhile, ranchers Gary and Darcy Ely put 71 heifers into a pasture near the wolves.

"About the third week, we found them all bunched and nervous," Darcy Ely said Thursday. "We found two of them that had been attacked."

One cow had to be destroyed, the second is on antibiotics and might recover, she said.

The wolves were trapped in January and now are at the Sevilleta Wolf Management Facility in New Mexico. Officials with the reintroduction program hope to release them.

The Mexican wolf is the only endangered species in the U.S. that the Fish and Wildlife Service is required to remove or kill if members of the subspecies live

outside arbitrary boundary lines, which delineate the Gila and Apache National Forests and the Fort Apache Indian Reservation as habitat.

The Service's three-year review of its recovery plan urged a rule change in the Federal Register to allow the agency to make case-by-case decisions on whether or not to allow Mexican wolves to roam freely, just as it manages other high-profile endangered species. The five-year review released earlier this year concurred.

"Present recovery zone boundaries are inadequate and impeding wolf recovery," the latest review states. "We recommend that the project modify the final non-essential experimental rule to allow for wolves to occur in areas within the southwestern distinct population segment of the gray wolf where they do not conflict with livestock or humans."

But conflict continues to be a problem. Michael Robinson, coordinator of carnivore conservation for the Grant County-based Center for Biological Diversity, said Friday that the conflicts are sometimes perplexing.

"Wolves range across two national forests, and this allotment and a couple of others have consistently seen conflicts," he said. "It's striking how many ranchers are able to coexist with wolves and unfortunate that in some allotments there seem to be recurring problems."

Robinson said his organization has filed a Freedom of Information Act request

with the agency to examine the details of the alleged depredation on the allotment.

Earlier this year, U.S. District Judge Robert E. Jones delivered a victory to conservationists when he overturned a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service rule that downlisted the gray wolf's endangered status and divided historic wolf ranges.

The judge enjoined and vacated the April 1, 2003 national wolf reclassification rule that divided all gray wolf historic range in the contiguous 48 states into three huge distinct population segments.

Robinson said the service's rule would also have downlisted wolves in most of the West and East from "endangered" to "threatened" status and precipitated a recovery planning process for wolves in the Southwest, parts of the southern Rocky Mountains and the Colorado Plateau without consideration of the Mexican gray's unique status as a locally evolved subspecies.

As a result of the ruling, Robinson said recently issued rules will have to be rescinded for the Eastern and Western Gray Wolf Distinct Population Segments which would have allowed ranchers to shoot wolves on sight if they could claim the lobos were chasing domestic animals – even if they had no evidence.

The Associated Press contributed to this story.

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