Keeping wolves out of trouble

Jodi Peterson | Sep 23, 2008 03:50 PM

It sounds like common sense -- require ranchers in wolf-recovery areas to clean up their dead cattle, so that the predators don't develop a taste for livestock. Now, that may happen in eastern Arizona's Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest. The forest is included in the struggling Mexican wolf reintroduction program. Only about 50 Mexican wolves now roam free in Arizona and New Mexico, while the feds have killed or captured more than 50 for preying on livestock over the last 10 years.

The anti-scavenging policy got its start in the Northern Rockies when wolves were reintroduced in that region in '95. To prevent wolves from chowing on cow and horse carcasses and thus learning to view the animals as prey, ranchers had to render their dead livestock impossible to scavenge (by hauling them off, burying them, dousing them with corrosive lime, burning them, or blowing them up with dynamite).

But in the Mexican wolf recovery area, ranchers have been allowed to leave dead cattle lying around, inadvertently tempting the wolves. Now, the draft plan for the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest proposes adopting a policy similar to that in the Northern Rockies. "It's an important precedent," says Michael Robinson of the Center for Biological Diversity, noting that other national forests in the Mexican wolf recovery area, such as the Gila, could follow Apache-Sitgreaves' lead.

But the new policy wouldn't address intentional baiting of wolves with live animals. As we reported last fall, a ranch-hand in Catron County, N.M. claimed to have deliberately lured a female wolf by branding cattle close to the animal's den and then leaving a vulnerable cow and calf in the area overnight. The wolf killed the cows and thus got its "third strike" (after three documented livestock attacks within a year, a wolf must be shot or permanently put into captivity). After the ranch-hand's revelation, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service began an investigation, which is still underway.