

Tucson Citizen

Environmentalists want new wolf recovery plan

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ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. — Environmentalists say the federal government's current plan for re-establishing the Mexican gray wolf in the wild is outdated and legally invalid, and petitioned the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on Wednesday to revise it.

"We're managing a very imperiled population of wolves based on planning that's over 20 years old and didn't imagine actual recovery goals — the threshold at which we can say we've done enough and we can take the animal off the (endangered species) list," said Rob Edward, director of carnivore recovery for WildEarth Guardians in Denver.

The current recovery plan was completed in 1982 — 16 years before any wolves were released into the wild in the Southwest. It focused heavily on captive breeding and said little about how to manage wolves in the wild or the process of developing a viable wild population, said Michael Robinson of the Center for Biological Diversity in Pinos Altos.

The center, WildEarth Guardians and the Rewilding Institute petitioned Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne and Fish and Wildlife Service Director Dale Hall for clear goals and deadlines for delisting the species with attention to the wolves' genetic pool.

Amendments to the Endangered Species Act in 1988 established standards for recovery plans that were not met in the 1982 Mexican wolf plan, the groups said.

Edward said the plan should be redone before the government revises policies governing the reintroduction program.

"It's a fool's errand to base new policies on a plan that has been gathering dust for over two decades," he said.

Fish and Wildlife also wants to redo the recovery plan, said Elizabeth Slown, spokeswoman for the agency's Albuquerque regional office. But, she said, that's being held up by competing judges' orders over the larger gray wolf species elsewhere in the

nation.

"Those need to be sorted out a little more carefully before we take up the recovery plan again," she said. She had no idea when that can be done.

The Mexican gray wolf, a subspecies of the gray wolf, was exterminated in the wild in the Southwest by the 1930s.

In March 1998, the government began reintroducing wolves along the Arizona-New Mexico border in a 4 million acre-plus territory interspersed with forests, private land and towns.

The wolves in Arizona and New Mexico have been designated as a "nonessential, experimental population." That gives Fish and Wildlife greater flexibility to manage them under the Endangered Species Act and allows permanent removal — by capturing or killing a wolf — after three confirmed livestock kills in a year.

The Center for Biological Diversity has sued Fish and Wildlife in the past over the wolves' management, contending orders to permanently remove or kill individual animals are compromising the species' genetic diversity.

Wednesday's petition said the lack of an adequate recovery plan and the "unsustainable rate" of removing wolves from the wild stand in the way of recovery.

The reintroduction program had predicted a self-sustaining wild population of 100 wolves by now, but there were 52 as of the last official count in January — seven fewer than in the previous year. Fish and Wildlife, which conducts one count of wild wolves each year, said the number has fluctuated since with deaths, births and removals.

The petitioners said the Mexican gray wolf is not on a trajectory toward recovery.

The population has fallen far short of reintroduction goals, said Dave Parsons, former Mexican wolf recovery coordinator for Fish and Wildlife and now carnivore conservation biologist for The Rewilding Institute.

"We could lose the lobo in the wild for a second time if my former agency doesn't get serious about recovery," he said.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

ON THE WEB

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service:
www.fws.gov/southwest/es/mexicanwolf/