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A Decade On, Southwest Wolf Reintroduction Effort Faces Long Odds

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SEVILLETA NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE, N.M. -- Not long after daybreak on a frigid morning three days before Christmas, Susan Dicks and about 20 volunteers form a wide circle around a young Mexican gray wolf confined to a soccer field-sized pen at the Mexican wolf holding facility here.

"Let's close in a little more on the left," says Dicks, a Fish and Wildlife Service veterinarian whose job is to keep the 11 wolves held here disease-free. "Let's tighten the circle just a little."

A half-hour later, the circle has become a tight human trap, and the wolf, called "M1133," crawls under a juniper tree near his doghouse-like den box near the fence line. Carefully reaching beneath the branches, a volunteer gently pins him with a "Y-stick." Soon, subdued by a blue cloth muzzle that covers both eyes and mouth, the young male is on the ground, heart pumping at 120 beats per minute, as Dicks takes his vitals and inserts the first of several needles carrying vaccines against distemper, parvo and rabies. Minutes later, the muzzle is removed and M1133 bolts to the far side of the three-quarter-acre pen, looking back over his shoulder with a mixture of puzzlement and fear.

With their high fences, den boxes and plastic water tubs, the half-dozen pens of this FWS holding facility are a far cry from the remote, rugged wildlands of the recovery zone that M1133 and other Mexican wolves are supposed to inhabit about 300 miles southwest of here on the New Mexico-Arizona border. But this facility has become an essential, if controversial, part of FWS's 12-year-old Mexican wolf reintroduction program, one of the most troubled -- and by many estimates, unsuccessful -- endangered species programs in the country.

When M1133 is released into the wild, he will join 42 other Mexican wolves, or los lobos, roaming the Gila and Apache national forests not far from the Mexican border. That is about half the number FWS had hoped to see by now when the agency released the first 11 wolves into the area, and the lowest number since 2002 (Land Letter, Feb. 11).

How the young male fares in his new home will depend on how well he plays by the program's rules. He will have to resist the urge to prey on livestock and stay within the federally designated 6,850-square-mile Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area set aside for his species. If he violates the rules, he could land back in the holding facility, which some locals refer to as "wolf jail."

Or, he could meet a worse fate: M1133 could become another casualty of the intensively managed recovery program, which allows for wolves that repeatedly prey on livestock to be killed by wildlife officials. So far, about 29 Mexican wolves have died in the hands of the recovery program; 11 "problem wolves" were shot, and the others died from a variety of causes, including stress during captures. Illegal shooting has also contributed to the death toll. In fact, the first wolf released in 1998 was shot by a private property owner. And as recently as last year, two of the eight wolves that died were found with gunshot wounds.

Now, with the population struggling to find its ecological niche in the Blue Range recovery area, FWS is reassessing its management approach. Last year, for example, the agency abandoned a controversial policy that required any wolf that preyed on livestock or left the boundaries of the recovery zone three times to be captured or killed. Under the new guidelines, FWS has greater discretion over how such wolves are handled (Land Letter, Nov. 19, 2009).

Yet even with reforms, there is no guarantee Mexican wolves will permanently reoccupy even a portion of their historic range. While population numbers remain stagnant, the wolf's chances are further compromised by a shallow gene pool, which some critics believe has been worsened by FWS policies. And if the biological hurdles were not enough, the sociological ones are even higher, with wolf advocates and wolf opponents fighting FWS's every move with equal vigor.

And so, more than a decade after the first, ill-fated Mexican wolf was released into the wilds of Arizona, the species has arrived again at a crucial crossroads.

A failed program

By almost all accounts, after 12 years of trial and error, the government's Mexican wolf recovery program is a failure -- both biologically and politically.

"The program is in crisis," said Eva Sargent, Southwest program director for Defenders of Wildlife, one of several of groups that have closely monitored FWS's recovery efforts. "They need to figure out what they need to do, and do it quick."

"The program isn't working," said Erik Ness, a spokesman for the New Mexico Farm and Livestock Bureau, which has fought the government over its reintroduction efforts. "They'll never make ranchers happy, because they're feeding beef to these wolves."

But Benjamin Tuggle, FWS's Southwest regional director and top overseer of the recovery program, says the agency is determined to keep at it. "I kind of bristle when I hear the word failure," he said. "I know there are a lot of people who would like to believe we're failing, but I don't take that position. We're not backing off."

At the heart of the program's troubles is a clash between biology and economics, and the fate of another male wolf, named "M574," illustrates the dilemma.

Biologists say M574 was an important animal to the recovery program, providing a much-needed influx of good, strong genes to the population, which traces its lineage to 11 wolves from Mexico that were used to start the program. But in July 2004, wildlife officials shot M574 after he killed four cattle. His removal appeased ranchers who viewed M574 as a menace, but it created a genetic void that has yet to be filled.

But one thing is for certain: The federal government will continue to exterminate wolves that prey on livestock. "FWS is committed to removing problem wolves," said Maggie Dwire, FWS's Mexican wolf assistant recovery coordinator. "In a perfect world, you wouldn't. But there's a need to. Where wolves and livestock coexist, there are going to be problems."

Wolf advocacy groups see problems, too. But not with the wolves, which they say continue to endure harassment from government regulators and private citizens alike.

"This animal is on the brink," said Michael Robinson of the Center for Biological Diversity, which filed a lawsuit against FWS in January to compel the agency to step up its recovery efforts. "It can't afford any more trapping and shooting."

In its lawsuit, CBD argues that the Mexican wolf population is its own unique entity that should be classified as a "distinct population segment," instead of being treated as a subset of the larger gray wolf population, which includes wolves in the northern Rockies and Great Lakes. Such a move could result in fewer removals from the wild and would make it easier for the agency to develop a specific recovery plan for el lobo, with clear criteria for delisting.

Yet opposition to strengthening the wolves' ESA status remains strong among ranchers and county officials. About 65 percent of the recovery area is comprised of grazing lands, and ranchers routinely report losses of cattle to wolves.

"I think in the course of dealing with biological systems, you're going to have setbacks, purely because you're approaching it as a biological objective," Tuggle said. "But there are social considerations. If this wasn't a predator, I think things would be different. But this is a top-line predator. And wolves eat cows."

Anti-wolf sentiment is as much about history and culture as it is about economics. Tom Buckley, a spokesman for FWS's Southwest office, noted that antipathy for wolves dates back to the nation's founding.

"They had a bounty on them in the early 1600s, the pilgrims did. It's just always been there," said Buckley, who used to work for the agency's northern Rockies office, which oversaw that region's larger gray wolf reintroduction effort. "People have this visceral reaction against wolves."

As settlers moved West and carved ranches out of the rugged landscape, wolves were seen as one of many obstacles to making a living. For much of the 19th century, state governments paid bounties to ranchers who killed wolves, and by the mid-20th century Mexican wolves were all but exterminated throughout Arizona, New Mexico and Texas. A century later, some of those same communities wonder why the government now wants wolves back on the land.

"This has been a ranching community since the 1800s," said Ed Werheim, a Catron County commissioner and rancher. "If a rancher has to get out of the business because of the wolf, does that make any sense?"

'Wolves have a way of humbling you'

Ecologically speaking, the Gila and Apache national forests, which straddle a mountainous, largely forested -- and largely unpopulated -- corner of the Southwest, seem like the perfect place to reintroduce wolves. Mexican gray wolves once thrived there, and in some ways, the place has not changed much. Elk, deer and other prey are still abundant, much of the area is wilderness, and unlike many places in the Southwest, water is fairly plentiful.

But wolves need lots of room to roam, and confining the population to just under 7,000 square miles -- a concession made to opponents when FWS designed the program in the mid-1990s -- does more to penalize the population than encourage it to grow, critics say.

When wolves that wander outside the recovery zone or prey on livestock are captured and relocated, they are forced to establish new territory and find new prey. Such disruptions can interfere with pack formation and lower survival rates, independent reviews of the program have found.

Genetic inbreeding is also becoming a more serious concern among biologists, and removals in recent years have compounded the problem. In 2005, for instance, FWS removed several wolves due to livestock depredation, including all but one from the most reproductively successful pack. Those removals greatly shallowed the remaining gene pool and weakened the population further. At the same time, FWS has been slow to introduce genetically robust wolves from captivity that could reverse the trend, said Rich Fredrickson, a conservation geneticist at the University of Montana.

"They haven't been very proactive about it," Fredrickson said. "They've taken a very lackadaisical approach in my opinion."

Plus, there is the unpredictability of dealing with a wild species.

"Whenever you're talking about re-establishing a population that wasn't there, you run into all sorts of idiosyncrasies you didn't expect," such as reproduction and survival rates and pack dynamics, Tuggle said. "But wolves have a way of humbling you and teaching you things you didn't know before."

Tuggle and his colleagues hope that necessity will prove to be the mother of invention.

After more than a decade of studying Mexican wolves and dealing with the challenges of allowing wolves to be wolves while also responding to the concerns of ranchers and landowners, the program seems poised for an overhaul.

While FWS has revoked its "standard operating procedure 13," or SOP 13 -- the so-called "three strikes rule" -- amid concerns that the policy was too aggressive in removing wolves, the agency is still sorting out just what recovery might mean for the Mexican wolf.

"It's like being in a washing machine," said Dwire, who helped commandeer the capture of M1133, driving toward his pen over dirt roads in a white government-issued SUV. "Everything is stirred up right now."

A 2009 assessment by FWS concluded that 100 wolves and 18 breeding pairs -- the program's original target -- is not enough to ensure a viable population over the long-term (Greenwire, Jan. 12, 2009). Others say that given the difficulties surrounding the program, FWS may have to lower its expectations.

"I think we've reached a point where we have to ask some hard and fast questions about what those numbers should be," Tuggle said. "We want the program to be a success. And one thing we cannot afford to do is ignore the social implications."