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Wolf-recovery program now 'at risk of failure'

Animals reintroduced to Eastern Arizona haven't flourished, federal report says

By Tim Steller

Twelve years after Mexican gray wolves were reintroduced in Eastern Arizona, their dwindling numbers are putting the population "at risk of failure," says a recent report by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Factors such as the rigid borders of the endangered wolves' recovery area, removal of wolves to protect livestock, and illegal shooting of wolves are keeping the only wild population of Mexican gray wolves from growing, says the "conservation assessment" released last month.

After 1998, when the first 11 wolves were released in the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area, their numbers started growing and were expected to reach 100 wolves in 2006. The known population hit a high of 59 in 2006 but then began dropping, falling to 42 last year.

The project has cost taxpayers $20 million or more since 1998. Now officials and others are seeking a way to move the wolf program further from its origin as a way to rescue the subspecies, and instead create a viable wild population.

"It is time to shift the focus of the recovery program from the 'brink of extinction' toward pursuit of full recovery," the report concludes.

Among the initiatives under way is a proposed release of eight captive wolves into the area, which would be the most wolves released since 2003. The regional head of the Fish and Wildlife Service discussed the possible release with the directors of Arizona's and New Mexico's game and fish departments Wednesday.

Other efforts to salvage the population are less direct but perhaps as important over the long term:

• Some ranchers are adopting practices to limit contacts between their herds and wolves.

• The service is reconvening a "recovery team" and writing a new plan for the wolves to replace the existing, 1982 plan.

• Mexico, which has no known wild wolves, is planning its first release of wolves, in northeastern Sonora, which could be a key step in creating a healthy subspecies.

Closer to home, advocates on various sides of the wolf issue continue filing lawsuits, keeping the program in litigation. And some ranchers in the area continue to question the project's existence.

"The Fish and Wildlife Service would like to see us shut up and take our medicine," said Laura Schneberger, a rancher who heads the Gila Livestock Growers Association.

Problematic rules

The conservation assessment suggests the problems with the wolf population were built into it through its "removal" rules.

Under those rules, wolves that establish territories completely outside the boundaries of the Blue Range program or that establish a tendency to attack livestock are to be removed from the area. Since 1998, 144 wolves have been removed from the project area - more than the 92 that have been released in the same period.

U.S. wildlife officials reintroduced gray wolves in Eastern Arizona in 1998. Arizona Daily Star photo

"The No. 1 obstacle to Mexican gray wolf recovery has been removal, whether legal by the federal government or illegal in the form of poaching," said Nicole Rosmarino, the wildlife program director for an environmental group called WildEarth Guardians, which has sued over the wolf project.

Indeed, 31 wolves are known to have been shot during the life of the program, making shooting the top cause of mortality in the population. The Fish and Wildlife Service said at least two wolves were shot to death in 2009.

Service investigators are looking into the shootings and have turned over two cases to the U.S. Attorney's Office in New Mexico, said Nicholas Chavez, the service's law-enforcement chief for the Southwest.

The assessment also raises the issue of the strict boundaries of the wolf recovery area as preventing population growth. Wolves are only released into a small "primary recovery area" in Eastern Arizona, along the border with New Mexico, and the farther they stray from that area, the greater the risk of being removed or picked up and put back in the primary area.

In previous years, the service has explored releasing wolves directly into the "secondary" recovery area in New Mexico, but it hasn't done so due to objections from that state, said Michael Robinson of the Center for Biological Diversity, which has been a frequent litigant in the wolf program. Now the service is talking about that option again, but Robinson says he'll believe it when he sees it.

"That should have been completed in 1999 or early 2000," he said.

Livelihood concerns

Much of what the service and environmentalists are proposing, Schneberger sees as threatening to her livelihood and that of her neighbors. Like many ranchers in the area, Schneberger leases U.S. Forest Service land for grazing cattle, and she sees the service as increasingly unfriendly to their way of life.

The new conservation assessment "just gives the environmentalists more momentum to sue," she said.

Her group last month filed a notice that it intends to sue over the government's increasing reluctance to remove wolves since 2007.

The truth about the project, Schneberger said, is it's doomed by genetic limitations. Just seven wolves trapped in the 1970s are ancestors of the entire population of Mexican gray wolves, including the 42 in the project and more than 300 in captive breeding sites.

"They have plenty of space. They just can't breed," Schneberger said.

The assessment concurs that it appears some breeding pairs are producing smaller litters due to inbreeding. But the captive breeding program, which has wolves living in 48 sites in the United States and Mexico, works to maximize genetic diversity, said Peter Siminsky, a former Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum researcher who now coordinates the program from Palm Desert, Calif.

"We have a studbook - a complete genealogy of all wolves in captivity and even some in the wild, going back to the founding animals," he said.

That lets scientists ensure genetic diversity is conserved in both the captive and wild populations. The captive animals are bred to maximize genetic diversity, and wolves are released into the wild based in part on their genetic suitability.

Limiting interactions

While some ranchers fight the wolf project outright, others are adjusting their practices to limit interactions between their herds and wolves.

Craig Miller, who works in the Tucson office of Defenders of Wildlife, said he's been working with a half dozen or so ranchers to help introduce new methods, paid for in part by his group:

• Adding additional riders to accompany herds in the summer calving and grazing season, steering them away from wolves.

• Supplying portable electric fencing to help keep sheep and cattle separate from wolves.

• Consolidating the livestock breeding schedule so calves are born in the winter, so they're bigger when wolves and pups emerge from their dens in summer.

"That's a huge step toward coexistence," he said.

Release in the works

Mexico's planned release of five wolves in northeastern Sonora did not happen as scheduled in February but is still planned.

The main issue remains the objections of cattlemen, said Juan Carlos Bravo, the northwestern Mexico representative of the environmental group Naturalia. Bravo said he's hopeful that showing ranchers the protections they're offered from depredation by wolves will sway them to support the release.

The government plans to release the wolves this summer in the Sierra San Luís, a mountain range that runs from the easternmost Arizona-Mexico border south about 80 miles.

The release could be important to wolf recovery in that the population, if it takes, will be close enough that it could intermingle with the Blue Range population, but far enough away that they couldn't both be wiped out by the same epidemic or other catastrophe.