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FWS Doubles Down on Effort to Recover los Lobos

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Greenwire

The federal Mexican wolf reintroduction program, 12 years old this year, is going through the usual growing pains of adolescence.

According to its architects, the program has learned from its mistakes and is now ready to mature into a successful effort that will establish a viable, self-sustaining population of Mexican gray wolves in Arizona and New Mexico.

But few endangered species recovery programs have encountered such vehement resistance, and the program's ultimate success may rest with how well the Fish and Wildlife Service can appease local communities that contend with the sometimes harsh realities of living amid wolves.

The one thing most observers of the Mexican wolf reintroduction program agree on is that the time is ripe for a major overhaul.

Several recent developments suggest the program is about to undergo a significant transformation.

For instance, FWS last year abolished its controversial "three strikes" rule, which directed FWS to remove wolves that preyed on livestock three times in a year. Now the agency has more discretion in deciding whether to remove a wolf from the wild. (While Mexican wolves are listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act, they are designated as a "nonessential experimental" population, allowing FWS to legally kill or remove wolves that prey on livestock.)

And as the population stagnates, each wolf roaming the wilds of southeastern Arizona and southwestern New Mexico

takes on a greater importance to recovery efforts. Federal biologists are still scratching their heads over last year's disappointing Mexican wolf census, which counted 42 animals in the wild -- 27 in Arizona and 15 in New Mexico -- down from 52 the year before. The 2009 count was the lowest since 2002 (Land Letter, Feb. 11).

Pup mortality also was higher last year, and eight Mexican wolves -- four adults and four pups -- were found dead in 2009, including two that were illegally shot. Necropsy results on the others are pending.

Faced with responding to the dropping wolf numbers, as well as defending the program against a raft of lawsuits from both environmentalists and anti-wolf groups, FWS officials are rolling up their sleeves and molding the program anew. "We have committed ourselves to recovering this species," said Benjamin Tuggle, director of FWS's Southwest office in Albuquerque, N.M.

But the agency's biggest challenge may lie not in revising its recovery program rules, but in winning hearts and minds in a region that is home to more livestock than people.

A new recovery 'road map'?

For Mexican wolves to flourish in the Southwest again, major changes will need to be made to current FWS policies, critics say.

For one, the 28-year-old recovery plan is outdated and should be replaced by a new one that includes clear recovery goals and reflects the latest science, said David Parsons, the agency's first Mexican wolf recovery program coordinator, who is now a wildlife biologist with the Rewilding Institute, which focuses on wildlife and wilderness protection.

"We really need a modern recovery plan," Parsons said. "The plan was written in

1982, before the scientific discipline of conservation biology even came into being. We know a whole lot more about conserving endangered species now."

That plan was not intended to guide the program for this long, he added. "It didn't even lay out the road map for full recovery, just a road map for getting started," he said. "That needs to be done really soon."

Eva Sargent, Southwest director for Defenders of Wildlife, who has followed the program for years, agreed.

"They're not going to get back on track unless they have a recovery plan to do so," Sargent said.

Tuggle, the top FWS official overseeing the Mexican wolf program, acknowledged that revising the recovery plan is a key step in ensuring the success of the program over the long term. But, he added, questions remain over whether FWS can create a new recovery plan for Mexican wolves, given that they are legally tied to the larger gray wolf population in the United States, which extends across three broad regions, including the northern Rocky Mountains and Great Lakes.

A new plan will be drafted "as soon as we can get the bureaucratic positioning," Tuggle said.

But Parsons and other critics say there is no need to wait, noting that Mexican gray wolves were considered part of the larger gray wolf population when FWS drafted the original recovery plan in 1982 as well.

"I think that's bogus, because the first recovery plan was drafted under the same circumstances," Parsons said.

"I'm delighted Dr. Tuggle is promising we'll have another recovery plan, but

I'd be more delighted to actually see it happen, rather than more promises," added Michael Robinson of the Center for Biological Diversity, whose group has sued FWS to try to force it to move ahead with a new recovery plan.

When FWS does update its recovery plan, it is likely to incorporate at least some of the recommendations from a recent review of the program and draw from a conservation assessment due in the next few months. But whatever changes are made to the recovery plan or the rules that guide the program, Tuggle emphasized FWS will retain its policy of removing wolves that attack livestock. The biological needs of the program have to be balanced with economic concerns, he said.

Expanding boundaries

One critical change, critics say, is the purging of a longstanding requirement that wolves that roam beyond the official recovery area -- encompassing 7,000 square miles of southeastern Arizona and southwestern New Mexico -- be captured and returned.

Wolves need to roam -- Mexican wolves can travel up to 40 miles in a 24-hour period -- and having the freedom to colonize new territory is important for establishing a viable population, Parsons said. After a year or two with the pack, young wolves strike out on their own to find a mate and hunting grounds.

"Wolves are renowned for just saying, 'I'm outta here. I'm going to see what I can find,'" Tuggle said.

But even if FWS allows wolves to venture beyond the recovery zone, it remains unclear how they would fare. "The hardest part is we don't know, because we haven't allowed them to distribute," Tuggle said.

Some biologists have also called for creating new populations of Mexican wolves in the Southwest.

Taking a cue from the more successful gray wolf reintroduction program in the northern Rockies, which greatly benefited from releases in Yellowstone

National Park, wolf advocates have sued FWS to compel the agency to establish a new population in Grand Canyon National Park.

FWS also should allow for direct releases of wolves in the wild in New Mexico, critics say. Under the existing rule, the agency can only directly release wolves into Arizona, due to concessions made to opponents of the program when the rule was formulated.

Robinson of CBD said he believes that simply leaving the wild population alone, except perhaps to introduce new animals, is the best way to allow Mexican wolves to get a strong foothold.

"If we stop predator control, wolves will survive," Robinson said.

According to FWS's latest draft conservation assessment, wolf-livestock conflicts were the leading cause of removal, accounting for 70 out of 142 removals.

But FWS has always viewed the removal of "problem wolves" as a key to the program's success and the agency will retain that option, Tuggle said.

Even with that concession to ranchers, however, the biggest question is whether the age-old conflict between wolves and humans can be assuaged to the point of acceptance. Without that, local communities will undoubtedly continue to fight the program, and illegal shootings -- a primary cause of death for Mexican wolves -- will continue.

Wolves vs. livestock

Wildlife officials have tried a range of techniques to keep wolves away from livestock -- ranging from hanging colorful flagging around sheep corrals to cowboy monitoring of livestock to setting up food caches -- but such strategies have met only moderate success.

Matthew Wunder, chief of conservation services for the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, one of several agencies that helps implement the Mexican wolf reintroduction program, said an experiment involving the use of flagging around a sheep corral in Arizona effectively deterred wolves from attacking

the animals within. But that is not a practical solution for cattle, which typically spread out across a large grazing allotment.

"We've tried some things, but what works one time sometimes doesn't work the next time," said Wunder, who served on an interagency group that made recommendations to FWS on how to manage the program.

Until new methods are perfected for keeping wolves and livestock apart, the best approach for dealing with depredation is to financially compensate ranchers who lose animals to wolves, Wunder said.

Defenders of Wildlife has paid ranchers for their losses for years, and some states have begun their own compensation programs. But those payments sometimes do not cover associated losses, such as lower livestock weights due to stress or fewer calves due to the death of a cow that would have had offspring.

To address those issues and to make sure more ranchers receive compensation, FWS is establishing what it calls an "interdiction fund," which will be used to pay ranchers for livestock killed by Mexican wolves and also to find effective ways to reduce livestock-wolf conflicts.

"We've tried hard to set that up because depredation is an impediment. And if we can address that, then we can do more," Tuggle said.

The ultimate goal, he added, is less conflict and fewer wolf removals. "I think if we allow these wolves to do what they do on the landscape, they'll become a sustainable population," he said. "And they can be recovered. I believe that, I do."

FWS has signed an agreement with the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation to oversee the interdiction fund, which currently has about \$30,000 in its coffers. Officials hope the fund will eventually grow to about \$1 million, with payouts to ranchers set by recommendations from a stakeholder group.

"We're not asking them to come together to sing 'Kumbaya.' That's probably not

going to happen,” Tuggle said. “But there are rational people with rational minds who will come together and find a way to work it out. It’s up to us to make sure there’s enough in the fund and make it work.”

According to the New Mexico Farm Service Agency, verified wolf depredations cost ranchers \$70,000 during 2008 and 2009 combined. The agency announced last week it will now begin distributing federal emergency assistance funds for livestock losses to ranchers whose animals are killed by wolves. Under the program, ranchers will receive payments for 65 percent of the value of the lost animal.

Clearer direction from FWS about what the agency hopes to achieve with its recovery effort will also help the program, Wunder added.

Under a legal settlement with environmental groups, FWS is to take full charge of wolf recovery, reducing the role of an interagency group called the Adaptive Management Oversight Committee. That committee includes representatives from the Agriculture Department’s Wildlife Services Division, Forest Service, New Mexico and Arizona state wildlife agencies, and White Mountain Apache Tribe, which hosts wolves on its lands in Arizona.

“If we get to the point where FWS will take more responsibility and provide more leadership for this program, I think that is a good opportunity to move forward,” said Wunder, who served on the interagency panel and is involved in discussions about whether it will continue in some form.

As the program becomes more successful, Wunder added, it should become easier to manage.

That is because the more wolves that are on the landscape, the less difficult it will be to decide whether to remove a problem wolf, because the loss to the population will not be as great, he said.

‘There is no solution’

But even with greater FWS responsibility

and accountability over Mexican wolf recovery efforts, there remains the challenge of easing decades of antipathy toward the program, especially among ranchers, outfitters and others in the largely rural area where the wolves have been reintroduced.

The new federal compensation program, if properly funded, could go a long way toward offsetting the economic losses from wolf depredation.

Ed Werheim, a Catron County, N.M., commissioner and critic of the FWS recovery plan, said the only way the compensation program will work is if every problem wolf is removed and ranchers are fairly paid for their losses.

Jess Carey, Catron County’s wolf incident investigator, takes a more bleak view.

“There is no solution,” Carey said. “Wolves and livestock and people are never going to be able to coexist. That’s how it’s been through history.”

In the end, there are still many people in the reintroduction area who simply do not like wolves.

“It just brings out strong feelings in people,” Wunder said. “There aren’t a lot of people in the middle.”

Robinson of CBD believes FWS has been too conciliatory toward program opponents in the past.

“All the compromises have been made on the conservation side to the detriment of the wolves,” he said.

“Reconciliation would be nice, where everyone gets together and agrees,” Robinson added. “But one has to look at reality. There are people who say they will not accept it. It doesn’t mean the program has to be sabotaged.”

Robinson’s solution to resolving the economic downsides of returning wolves to New Mexico and Arizona is to create a federal fund to buy out ranchers.

“The livestock industry has insisted that livestock and wolves are incompatible here,” Robinson added. “At first, I didn’t agree, because it’s happened elsewhere, such as Minnesota and the northern

Rockies. But they’ve now convinced me.”

Commissioner Werheim argues that if too many ranchers go out of business, which he believes could happen if wolf numbers increase, grazing lands could be displaced by subdivisions, wiping out wildlife habitat and marring the region’s rural character. “We’ve created a place that is unique,” he said. “We’ve kept it pristine, and we want to preserve it for future generations.”

While some question the likelihood of mushrooming subdivisions in a remote area, Wunder of the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish noted that one southwestern New Mexico community, Silver City in Grant County, is becoming a magnet for retirees, and he finds it plausible that the even more rural Catron County will grow as more people discover the beauty of the place. But that is not necessarily a bad thing for the Mexican wolf program, he said.

“I would expect as we go through time, the economy of that area will change as you have people moving in from outside bringing new perspectives,” he said. “And because the population is so small, it doesn’t take a whole lot of people to start changing the demographics. I think if you went back to that area 20 years from now, there will [be] some differences.”

Regardless of how the demographics change in the near future, one thing is for certain: The Mexican wolf recovery program is likely to look very different than it does today, even if the arguments for or against it do not change.

Ed Bangs, a veteran wolf biologist and coordinator for the northern Rockies wolf recovery effort, offered some advice for those embroiled in the debate over the future of the troubled program -- and it has nothing to do with biology or management. The best solutions, he said, are those that draw from the best ideas from everyone at the table, putting aside old animosities.

“Just listen to the other guy a little more than you would normally do,” Bangs said.