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Endangered Mexican gray wolf may get new help

*By Shaun McKinnon
The Arizona Republic*

The endangered Mexican gray wolf gained ground Tuesday in its struggle to survive when federal wildlife officials decided the animal may warrant greater protection than other, less-imperiled gray wolves.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said it will review the status of the Mexican wolf - native to Arizona, New Mexico and northern Mexico - and determine whether it should be classified as a separate subspecies of the wider-ranging gray wolf native to other parts of North America.

The difference is significant under the Endangered Species Act. The government would be required to create a recovery plan specifically for the Mexican wolf and set measurable goals for the species' recovery that would extend protection beyond what wolves elsewhere receive.

No such plan is in place, even as the wolves' numbers dwindle.

"This is clearly a step forward for the Mexican wolf," said Nicole Rosmarino, wildlife program director for the advocacy group WildEarth Guardians. "The wolves face real, significant threats and they need heightened protection."

The wildlife service announced its review of the wolf's status as part of a settlement with WildEarth Guardians, the Center for Biological Diversity and the Rewilding Institute, three conservation groups that petitioned the agency to reclassify the Mexican wolf.

A final ruling could take up to a year. The

fact that the federal agency has already decided there is enough evidence to warrant a full review tips the odds at least slightly in favor of a rarely bestowed subspecies listing, conservation groups believe.

The Mexican gray wolf was exterminated from its native habitat in the 1930s and 1940s and was originally listed as an endangered species in 1976. Two years later, the Mexican wolf was absorbed into a broader listing of almost all gray wolves after the government decided that such an approach afforded the animals better overall protection.

But while the wolf has recovered in some parts of the country - several populations were removed from the endangered species list in 2009 - the Mexican wolf has not.

A reintroduction program begun in 1998 has failed to establish a self-sustaining population. The latest count, conducted at the end of 2009, found just 42 wolves, mostly in the mountains of eastern Arizona.

The government already recognizes the Mexican wolf as endangered and has not moved to change that status even as it delists other wolf populations. But the wolf was reintroduced in Arizona under rules that don't require



Fewer than 50 Mexican gray wolves live in the wild. Most are in Arizona.
(Jim Clark/Associated Press)

a recovery plan.

That difference, environmental groups say, has hurt the wolf's survival odds.

"The Fish and Wildlife Service since the mid-1990s has been promising to come out with a new recovery plan for the Mexican wolf," said Michael Robinson, who works on wolf issues for the Tucson-based Center for Biological Diversity. "What we have now is a process that will make the plan a mandatory step. Ultimately, it may lead to reforms of the entire reintroduction program."

Federal officials will review the wolf's current status and threats it faces, such as loss of habitat, disease, problems with existing regulations and other factors that imperil the species' survival.

In its decision Tuesday, the wildlife agency disagreed with some claims made by environmental groups about threats to the wolf, but it acknowledged that many wolves have died as a result of human actions, including illegal shooting and collisions with vehicles.