

US investigates wolf killings

2 are dead, third missing from packs in Ariz., NM

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Federal law enforcement officials are investigating what they call the suspicious deaths of two endangered Mexican gray wolf alpha males in the past month - one in Eastern Arizona, the other in southern New Mexico.

The Arizona wolf from the Hawks Nest Pack was found shot to death June 18. The wolf from the San Mateo Pack in New Mexico was found dead June 24, authorities said.

The Hawks Nest Pack is known to use the area east of Big Lake in the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest as a spring and summer breeding territory, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service officials said. That pack's wolf was discovered in an area that is regularly used for public travel in the forest.

Killing a Mexican gray wolf is a violation of the Endangered Species Act.

The Fish and Wildlife Service is awaiting necropsy results to determine if the New Mexico wolf was also shot, said Charna Lefton, an agency spokeswoman.

In addition, a third alpha male wolf has been missing since mid-April, officials said. It belonged to the Paradise Pack, which has roamed the Fort Apache Reservation of Eastern Arizona.

Although that wolf was radio-collared, as of the end of June authorities had not been able to find him and now classify his status as "fate unknown," said Bruce Sitko, information and education manager in the Arizona Game and Fish Department's Pinetop office.

The two wolf deaths come less than a month after a Fish and Wildlife Service report said the 12-year-old Mexican wolf-recovery program was in danger of failing, in part because of a long history of wolf shootings. So far, 32 wolves are known to have been shot during the life of the program, making shooting the top cause of wolf mortality. The service said at least two wolves were shot to death in 2009; the shootings remain under U.S. investigation.

After 1998, when the first 11 wolves were released in the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area in Arizona, their numbers started growing and were expected to reach 100 wolves in 2006. But the known population topped out at 59 in 2006, then started dropping to a low of 42 last year.

The loss of the Hawks Nest alpha male will affect the behavior of remaining pack members, especially given the pack's seven new pups that were born in May, the service said. New pups require constant attention and food from other pack members to survive, the agency said, and Defenders of Wildlife officials said they are concerned that the fatherless pups will be less likely to survive.

Without the alpha, "the tendencies to teach the young by experienced animals may be compromised, as far as pursuing particular types of prey or determining where to pursue it," the Game and Fish Department's Sitko said.

The Hawks Nest Pack also has a proven record of avoiding domestic livestock and preferring native prey animals such as elk and deer, wildlife officials said.

"It's one of the best-behaved packs in terms of staying out of human wildlife and livestock conflicts," Sitko said. "They have even bypassed groups of cattle to get to elk that are on the same range."