

Mexican Wolves Number 50 in the Wild

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LAS CRUCES — The wild population of endangered Mexican gray wolves grew 19 percent in 2010 to a year-end total of 50, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced Tuesday

Benjamin Tuggle, the service's Southwest regional director, said he was encouraged by the population growth, which followed three years of stagnant growth or population declines.

Service officials attributed the growth in part to the fact that no wolves were removed from the wild last year for killing livestock, and to a high survival rate among pups born in the spring. In 2010, 14 of the 18 pups born in the spring survived to the end of the year, compared with only seven of 30 that survived in 2009.

Illegal shootings were the primary factor in wolf mortality in 2010. Five of the six wolves found dead last year were illegally shot, and the other death was caused by an intestinal blockage. The illegal killings are under investigation.

The Fish and Wildlife Service also announced Tuesday that it released two wolves from captivity into the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area, a sprawling expanse made up largely of national forests in southwest New Mexico and southeast Arizona.

When the federally managed effort to reintroduce gray wolves into the Southwest began in 1998, federal officials projected that the population would grow to 100 by the end of 2006. Tuggle said there are many factors the agency cannot control, such as illegal poaching and pup mortality, but he said he was "comfortable" with the progress being made.

Michael Robinson of the Center for Biological Diversity also welcomed the "trend in the right direction."

"Obviously, Mexican wolves are not out of the woods yet. They are still perilously close to extinction," Robinson said, "but I'd rather see a trend line up."