Lawsuit Against Wolves Withdrawn

By Rene Romo
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LAS CRUCES — Plaintiffs in a federal lawsuit critical of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's efforts to keep endangered Mexican gray wolves in the wild, even after repeated livestock kills, withdrew their lawsuit this week.

The plaintiffs filed a motion Tuesday in federal court in Las Cruces to voluntarily dismiss the lawsuit, meaning a similar lawsuit could be filed later.

Conservation groups that have long pushed for more aggressive recovery efforts to increase the wild wolf population hailed the development.

"This lawsuit was entirely without merit; the plaintiffs' motion to dismiss their own suit suggests they realize neither the law nor the facts are on their side," said Michael Robinson of the Center for Biological Diversity. The center had intervened in the lawsuit in support of the government together with Defenders of Wildlife.

The lawsuit was filed in August by longtime critics of the wolf recovery effort launched in 1998: the Catron and Otero County Commissions, a Catron County group called Americans for the Preservation of the Western Environment, the Adobe Ranch and the Beaverhead Ranch, Glenwood-area rancher Alan Tackman and the Gila National Forest Livestock Permittees' Association Inc.

Ruidoso attorney Dan Bryant, who represented the plaintiffs, could not be reached for comment. Catron County Manager Bill Aymar said he did not know why the lawsuit was withdrawn, and Otero County Manager Ray Backstrom referred questions to Bryant.

Fish and Wildlife announced Tuesday that the wild-roaming population of wolves in southeast Arizona and southwest New Mexico grew from 42 in 2009 to 50 at the end of 2010. When wolves were first released into the wild nearly 13 years ago, federal officials projected the population would grow to 100 by 2006.

In December, federal Judge Robert Brack dismissed the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish director as a defendant in the lawsuit.