

Pressure resumes for trapping ban in wolf area

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ALBUQUERQUE, N.M.—Now that state game officials have cleared the way for trapping to resume in southwestern New Mexico, environmentalists are renewing their calling for the federal government to do more to protect the Mexican gray wolf in the Southwest.

The U.S. Forest Service and the Fish and Wildlife Service received letters this week from the group WildEarth Guardians and its supporters. They asked that officials reconsider a 2010 petition seeking to end trapping throughout the wolf's range in southwestern New Mexico and southeastern Arizona.

Supporters contend trapping presents a threat to wolf recovery and that the agencies have a legal obligation under the Endangered Species Act to maintain fit wolves that can hunt for native prey.

“As a direct result of trapping activities in the recovery area, two wolves have had entire limbs amputated. Some wolves lost digits and others sustained different injuries,” the group said in its letters.

Michael Robinson of the Center for Biological Diversity, another pro-wolf group, said any additional injuries or deaths are “of grave concern just given the numbers and the genetic plight of the Mexican wolf.”

The federal government has been trying to reintroduce wolves to the region since 1998. Biologists had hoped to have more than 100 wolves in the wild within a decade, but that number is closer to 50.

Regulated furbearer trapping on the Gila and Apache national forests was banned last summer by former Democratic Gov.

Bill Richardson, a supporter of the wolf reintroduction effort.

The state Game Commission extended the ban last fall, giving researchers more time to study the risks of trapping and snaring to wolves. While the results of the study have yet to be made public, the commission voted last week to lift the ban.

Environmentalists want the Fish and Wildlife Service to amend the wolf reintroduction rule to ban the use of all traps and snares in the wolf's range. They want the Forest Service to impose emergency trapping closures on the Gila and Apache forests and amend any planning documents to ban trapping in the future.

Regional Fish and Wildlife spokesman Tom Buckley said Friday the agency isn't going to be doing anything differently in the area now

that New Mexico has lifted its trapping ban.

“There’s always a concern when there are additional threats in an area and this of course will entail an additional threat to the wolves, but they’ve had that before,” Buckley said, noting that the ban had been in place for only a year.

According to the Fish and Wildlife Service, there have been 14 incidents involving wolves caught in traps since 2002. In six cases, the animals were injured.

“It’s something we’ll keep an eye on,” Buckley said. “We would encourage anybody who does any trapping out there to check their traps regularly so that any wildlife, including wolves, if they get caught they don’t have to sit in the trap and suffer.”

The Mexican gray wolf was added to the federal endangered species list in 1976 after it was all but wiped out due to hunting and government-sponsored extermination campaigns.

The reintroduction effort along the New Mexico-Arizona border has been hampered by illegal shootings, court battles, concerns from environmentalists and complaints from ranchers. Another blow came last month when the New Mexico Game and Fish Department voted to pull out of the project.

Buckley said the Fish and Wildlife Service is still trying to make progress on revamping the wolf’s recovery plan and the agency is getting its new interdiction program up and running so ranchers who lose livestock to the wolves have another place to seek financial help.

In fact, the interdiction program had its first claim from a New Mexico rancher in June. The claim, which is being processed, sought \$1,500 for a pair of calves that were confirmed to have been killed by wolves.

Buckley said wildlife managers are also hopeful after seeing pups with

some of the packs during surveys in the wake of the Wallow fire, which burned hundreds of thousands of acres in Arizona and New Mexico.

“If they survive until the end of the year, they will be part of our count,” he said. “But between now and then, we’re just keeping our fingers crossed.”