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Idea For Wolf Diversity Draws Ire

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By Rene Romo / Journal North Reporter



Pictured is a female wolf released in Arizona in 1998. A lapse in release of new captive-born Mexican gray wolves to Southwest national forests could end next year, but the plan is drawing fire. (Arizona Game and Fish Department/AP)

LAS CRUCES — A four-year lapse in release of new captive-born Mexican gray wolves to Southwest national forests could end next year, but the proposal, floated by the Arizona Game and Fish Department, is already drawing fire from environmentalists as inadequate and little more than a way to forestall more robust releases.

The proposal is also worrisome, environmentalists say, because it appears to illustrate how much the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has deferred decision-making authority over the controversial releases to the Arizona agency.

The Fish and Wildlife Service has “made it clear that they want the state wildlife agencies to approve those releases and, because of that, we haven’t seen those releases,” said Sandy Bahr, the Phoenix-based director of the Sierra Club’s Grand Canyon chapter.

Asked whether the Arizona commission or its Game and Fish Department have the final say on whether wolves are released into the recovery zone in that state, a Fish and Wildlife Service spokesman issued a statement saying the federal government is responsible under the Endangered Species Act for recovering the wild wolf population.

The statement also said the federal agency and state work as “partners” in wolf recovery under a memorandum of understanding and that state partners “have no decision-making authority over” the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

But Peter Ossorio, a Las Cruces-based advocate of wolf recovery, said he was skeptical of the Service’s stated position. Ossorio said Arizona’s proposal amounts to a “veto” over new releases.

Charna Lefton, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s Southwest region headquartered in Albuquerque, said federal officials were reviewing the Arizona proposal and had no comment on it at this time. “We really don’t have anything to say about whether we support it or don’t support it,” Lefton said. “We haven’t made a decision.”

Replacement releases only

The Arizona Game and Fish Department proposal calls for the release of between one and three captive wolves to replace three lobos illegally shot between November 2011 and July 2012 in Arizona. Two of the wolves shot were males from the Bluestem pack.

In the various proposals under consideration, Arizona’s goal is to establish a breeding pair in the Bluestem pack and to, in essence, replace another pair, the Rim pack, that has not produced pups since the spring of 2010.

In the case of the Bluestem pack, a captive male could be released to bond with the pack’s alpha female or, if the female has already paired up with a wild male, captive-bred, genetically valuable pups could be placed with the pack to be “cross-fostered” or raised.

In the other case, Arizona is considering replacing two lobos, both fatally shot, by either releasing a female to take the place of the 10-year-old alpha female in the Rim Pack; or, releasing a breeding pair of wolves in the area of the Rim pack.

The proposal follows an Arizona Game and Fish Commission policy that says the agency will only support initial releases of wolves in the state to replace wolves killed illegally or that have died from “natural events,” such as vehicle collisions or lightning strikes.

The Arizona commission delegated to its director authority to decide whether to replace a wolf killed illegally, but it retained the authority when it comes to wolves killed by natural causes.

Only wolves killed in Arizona since the start of 2011 would be eligible for replacement. At least 12 wolves were killed illegally in New Mexico from the start of 2009 through 2011.

Under existing rules, captive-bred wolves can be released only to a primary recovery zone in Arizona. That means the “secondary” recovery zone in New Mexico, including the Gila National Forest, is available only for the relocation of previously captured wolves.

Supporters of the reintroduction program have long urged the Fish and Wildlife Service to change the project’s rules to allow the direct release of wolves into the Gila National Forest, since it makes up roughly three-fourths of the 4.4-million-acre Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area. The recovery area straddles the Arizona-New Mexico line and includes about 700,000 acres that are both roadless and free of livestock.

Late last month, the Center for Biological Diversity filed a federal lawsuit against the Service to compel the agency to adopt a rule change that would allow new releases of captive-bred wolves directly into New Mexico, a recommendation made by a team of wolf experts in 2001.

Ossorio said Arizona’s stringent release policy is an assertion of veto power over anything but “replacement” releases.

Ossorio and his wife, Jean, a vocal wolf advocate, noted that in the spring of 2010, Fish and Wildlife had readied a wolf pack for release. However, the release was delayed in April 2010 because “this proposed release has not yet been formally approved by AGFD (Arizona Game and Fish Department),” according to the program’s monthly notes published online.

The release never occurred, and the wolves have since been moved to a zoo. No wolf releases have occurred since late 2008, and the Service provided no information about any other releases it is considering for 2013.

In late 2009, the Fish and Wildlife Service settled a federal lawsuit filed by two environmental organizations that charged the agency had ceded its decision-making authority to an interagency group, including Arizona and New Mexico's game departments. The group had set up rules requiring a wolf to be removed after it had killed three livestock in a one-year period.

An inter-agency memorandum between the Service and the states was abandoned, replaced by a 2010 agreement that says the states have no decision-making authority over the Service. New Mexico's Game Commission pulled the state out of the recovery project one year later in 2011; Arizona remained.

Bahr said the Arizona commission's policy on new releases amounts to advocating "no net increase" in the number of wolves in the state.

Arizona Game Commission Chairman Norman Freeman disagreed with that characterization, saying that a cautious approach to releases is in the best interests of the lobos.

"As much as the commission wants to see the wolves recovered, just releasing them willy-nilly is not a good thing," Freeman said. Later, he added, "Releasing wolves with a plan that all the stakeholders have not bought into or come to consensus on is bad for the wolves."

First lobo release

Before the Service released the first 11 lobos into the Apache National Forest in eastern Arizona in March 1998, biologists had predicted there would be 102 wolves in the wild by the end of 2006. As of the end of 2011, the total in Arizona and New Mexico was 58. According to a three-year review of the project in 2001, the recovery area could support more than 400 wolves relying solely on elk and deer for prey.

In the project's first seven years, 87 wolves, an average of 12.4 per year, were released; five wolves have been released in the last eight years, and none in the last four.

Michael Robinson of the Center for Biological Diversity, said the Service is trying to "maintain Arizona Game and Fish as the gatekeeper for any releases of wolves into the wild, and to keep that gate open only a narrow crack."

Another Arizona commissioner, Jack Husted, said the state's "replacement release" proposal is designed to address concerns about the need for more genetic diversity in breeding pairs on the ground, but he expressed concerns about talk of having the wolf population grow to more than 1,000.

Asked if Arizona has final say over releases in that state, Husted responded: "If, in fact, the Arizona Game and Fish Department and the Fish and Wildlife Service are in partnership in this effort, the director of the (state agency) has the authority to either release or not to release wolves. . . . If we are going to be a true partnership, then if we start releasing wolves without their partner's agreement, then we don't have a partnership, do we?"

Asked a similar question at the Arizona commission's meeting Dec. 7, the Game and Fish Department Director Larry Voyles said federal authorities "have the ultimate role in determining releases" of wolves under the Endangered Species Act.

"We do have, uh, significant influence," Voyles said, adding, "We are not the sole controllers of the decision process."