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Gray Wolf Population Up by 30%

By Rene Romo / Journal North Reporter
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LAS CRUCES — The wild population of endangered Mexican gray wolves grew by nearly 30 percent last year to a total of 75, the largest tally in the history of the nearly 15-year-old project.

Benjamin Tuggle, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Southwest regional director, noted that the hotly debated effort to recover lobos in the wild has been beset by challenges, but in announcing the 2012 census, he said, "The bottom line is that I think this result shows we are moving toward our recovery goal."

Tuggle cited illegal poaching, which accounted for four wolf deaths, and limited genetic diversity, which is associated with smaller litter sizes and higher pup mortality, as the main challenges to greater growth of the wild population.

According to the January count, there are 38 wolves in New Mexico and 37 in Arizona. The total includes 20 pups who survived from spring to the end of the year.

While only three packs had lobos that met the federal definition of a breeding pair — an adult male and female that produced at least two pups surviving until the end of the year — Fish and Wildlife biologist Maggie Dwire said that seven packs produced at least one pup that survived through December.

Several environmental groups greeted the news of the lobo population increase Wednesday, but each called on the Fish and Wildlife Service to act more aggressively to promote growth in the numbers, in particular through more releases of captive-bred wolves living in captivity.

In 1998, state and federal partners released 11 Mexican wolves into the Apache National Forest in the effort to recover a species that had been hunted to the brink of extinction. The sluggish growth of the wild lobo population, dogged by illegal killings and official management practices that in the past required the removal of wolves blamed for killing three livestock in a one-year period, frustrated wolf advocates.

Before the initial 1998 release of wolves in Arizona, biologists estimated there would be 100 wolves in the Southwest and 18 breeding pairs by 2006. For nine years, from the start of 2003 through 2011, the wolf count averaged 50.

In the last four years, Fish and Wildlife only released one male wolf, in early January, to a primary recovery zone in Arizona, an area to which new releases are restricted under program rules. When that wolf failed to mate with a targeted female, the agency recaptured the male after less than one month, and paired him with a captive female with a goal of releasing the pack sometime this year.

Eva Sargent, Southwest program director for Defenders of Wildlife, urged Fish and Wildlife to implement a "genetic rescue plan immediately."

"For almost 15 years, management actions have kept wild population numbers low, decreasing genetic variability and the ability of this rarest wolf subspecies to adapt and survive," Sargent said.

"This puts the entire subspecies in a very vulnerable position that requires swift action from the Service for their long-term recovery."

Kevin Bixby, director of the Southwest Environmental Center in Las Cruces, called for the immediate release of some of the more than 300 Mexican wolves held in captivity: "That could and should happen tomorrow."

Tuggle said his agency plans to address concerns about limited genetic diversity with releases this year, but he did not provide details about the number or schedule of releases.