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## Increase Wolves' Genetic Pool by Releasing More to Wild

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.They can't sniff out the meaning of "control" orders or know that thousands of humans are urging their survival, but the 3-year-old alpha male and female and their five pups in the Fox Mountain pack at the northern edge of the Gila National Forest are at the center of a furor – and very much at risk – over the future of their kind.

This family of Mexican gray wolves killed four cattle on private land between March and July. They primarily eat elk.

The last depredation occurred after a range rider who was successfully hazing the wolves away from livestock suffered a medical emergency and was not replaced. The previous three depredations occurred before range riders were hired.

Conservation groups compensated the stock owners for their losses and paid for the range riders. But the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has ordered the removal of the alpha female of the Fox Mountain pack, citing not just the depredations but also her close genetic relationship to her mate, who is her first cousin.

Yet, the government's solution to the problem of inbreeding actually helped cause the problem in the first place.

Wolves don't naturally pair up with their cousins. A 2007 genetics study of northern Rocky Mountains gray wolves in Yellowstone National Park found that they "avoid inbreeding through a wide variety of behavioral mechanisms including absolute avoidance of breeding with related pack members male-biased dispersal to packs where they breed with nonrelatives. ...

Inbreeding avoidance is nearly absolute despite the high probability of within-pack inbreeding opportunities and extensive inter-pack kinship ties between adjacent packs."

That's in a population that transcended Yellowstone, spanning parts of Wyoming, Montana and Idaho, and numbered more than 1,500 wolves, including 100-plus breeding pairs. But the sole wild population of Mexican gray wolves, reintroduced to the Southwest in 1998 just three years after the Yellowstone reintroduction, at last count this year comprised just 58 wolves, including only six breeding pairs.

The Fish and Wildlife Service has not released a single new wolf from the captive-breeding pool since November 2008. The last wolf released that had previously been captured from the wild was freed in January 2011.

Since Mexican wolf reintroduction began, the government has shot 12 wolves, inadvertently killed 18 through capture, and kept 32 other once-wild wolves in long-term captivity; at least nine of those have died from age-related ailments.

One of the wolves shot in 2004 was killed months after his last of four depredations in a one-year period, after he had been seen feeding on an elk in the interim, and even after a Fish and Wildlife Service biologist emailed her supervisors that he was genetically irreplaceable.

All the Mexican wolves in the wild and in captivity stem from just seven animals that had narrowly escaped trapping and poisoning by the

Fish and Wildlife Service in the United States and in Mexico in the decades before passage of the Endangered Species Act in 1973. Live-capture and breeding of these seven wolves saved their kind from extinction.

A 2007 study of wild Mexican wolves showed that inbreeding was causing lower litter sizes and pup survival rates. But the Fox Mountain cousins have kept a pup alive from last year and four still alive from this spring's litter.

Fish and Wildlife Service conjectures that once the alpha female is removed her mate will find a less-related female. But they are together because in the absence of recently released wolves they could not find mates they're not related to.

The Service was right to reverse its initial decision to shoot her. But trapping is not the answer. Hiring a new range rider and resuming the release of captive-reared wolves are essential.

That way, today's Fox Mountain pack pups can find suitable mates in years to come, and thereby save their pups from possible infertility. If so, I hope their grandma will still be in the wild, helping to teach them to prey on elk.