

Feds face wolf-related lawsuits: Wolf recovery area includes Greenlee



Photo Courtesy of Dexter Oliver

Subject of suit

A Mexican gray wolf is caught in a trap. An environmental group intends to sue the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service over an agency trapping policy involving wolves that do not originate from the Blue Wilderness area in eastern Arizona and western New Mexico. The wolf program habitat area includes the Apache National Forest in northern Greenlee County. The suit will be the third such filed within the past month by the Center for Biological Diversity.

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By Walter Mares Managing Editor

Another chapter is being added to the controversial Mexican gray wolf recovery program that includes northern Greenlee County. The Center for Biological Diversity, which strongly supports the program, announced in a news release last week that it intends to sue the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service over a policy that allows the agency to trap wolves outside the designated wolf recovery area.

The legal action will be the third wolf-related lawsuit filed by the center within the last month against the USF&WS. The Mexican gray wolf is considered an endangered species.

The designated wolf recovery area includes the Blue Wilderness area of the Apache National Forest in northern Greenlee.

The Apache covers about two-thirds of Greenlee, the least populous and second smallest county in Arizona. The recovery area flows over into the Gila National Forest in neighboring New Mexico. All told, the recovery area zone totals almost 4.5 million acres.

Since its inception in the late 1990s, the wolf recovery program has met strong opposition from the Greenlee County Board of Supervisors and Greenlee cattle growers. The supervisors have at times questioned the USFWS's use of the term "reintroduction" because they are not convinced the wolves existed in Greenlee prior to the program's beginning.

The program also remains strongly opposed by the Catron County Board of County Commissioners in western New Mexico. Catron borders Greenlee. Officials in both counties have said they are concerned about wolves killing livestock, but also about the safety of humans who use the forests for recreation.

Outgoing Greenlee Supervisor Richard Lunt said that while there is a fund to compensate ranchers for cattle killed by wolves, it may prove difficult to determine a wolf-kill. By the time a cow is found, its carcass may be so decomposed it can be very difficult, if not impossible, to determine the cause of death.

The Center for Biological Diversity said in its news release that it filed the formal notice of intent to sue the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service over the agency's decision to grant itself a "recovery permit" to live-capture endangered wolves that may enter New Mexico and Arizona from Mexico or the Rocky Mountains. Mexico recently released nine Mexican gray wolves near the U.S. border in the Sierra Ma-

dre, and wolves from the northern Rocky Mountains could make their way south at any time.

Michael Robinson, the center's wolf specialist, said, "It's fantastic that Mexico's working to restore wolves to its northern wilds. And of course, these wolves in northern Mexico don't recognize political boundaries. If they're able to set up a home range that crosses the border, it would be tragic and wrong for Fish and Wildlife officials to then capture them and snatch them out of that home.

"Captured wolves will be placed into the captive-breeding program, returned to where they came from or relocated into the Mexican wolf recovery area. Right now, the only Mexican wolves in the two states are in the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area, an area between Interstate 40 and Interstate 10 where wolves are considered an experimental, non-essential population and therefore enjoy fewer safeguards. But any wolves entering from Mexico or the north will be fully endangered. "

Robinson said that over the past month, the center has filed two other lawsuits against the Fish & Wildlife Service on behalf of the Mexican wolf. One suit would compel reform of the stalled reintroduction program in the United States. The other legal action would give protection to the Mexican wolf as a subspecies, or distinct population, of the more widespread gray wolf, deserving of its own modern recovery plan.

The Mexican gray wolf is the smallest, most genetically distinct subspecies of gray wolf in North America, and the most imperiled. Robinson said trapping and poisoning by the Fish & Wildlife Service, in the U.S. and Mexico, prior to the 1973 passage of the Endangered Species Act, reduced Mexican wolves to just seven remaining animals. Those were caught alive and bred in captivity, enabling future reintroduction efforts in the two countries.