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We can still save Mexican gray wolf

Michael J. Robinson | MyView
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For millennia, the Mexican gray wolf served as an engine of natural evolution on the Southwestern landscape, helping keep deer alert, providing carrion for scavenging animals such as bears, eagles and badgers, and discouraging elk from lingering to graze streamside trees, providing habitat for songbirds, beavers and fish.

Our arid ecosystem shaped our native wolf into the smallest of the gray wolf subspecies in North America, an animal that preyed on the diminutive Coues whitetail deer, and that is the most genetically distinct gray wolf on our continent, and the rarest.

In 1998, the U.S. government reversed course from decades of trapping and poisoning that had eliminated Mexican wolves from the wild and reintroduced a small number of wolves to the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area and set a goal of having at least 100 wolves in the wild by 2006. Unfortunately, this goal has not been met and the population has continued to struggle, not for lack of tenacity on the part of the wolves, but because of polices by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service that are badly in need of reform.

Almost 15 years after the first Mexican wolves were reintroduced, a mere 58 wolves live in the wild, leading to inbreeding that researchers suggest may be lowering litter sizes and depressing pup-survival rates.

Wolf numbers have not thrived in part because the Fish and Wildlife Service as a matter of policy has aggressively captured wolves that leave the recovery area and thereby constrained natural growth of the population. The agency has also shot many wolves for preying on livestock, even in cases where ranchers have not done their part to protect their stock by, among other things, removing dead livestock that attract wolves.

In total, the agency has had 12 wolves shot, 35 captured and never released, and accidentally killed 18 wolves it meant to secure alive.

In 2001, the agency convened a panel of highly respected scientists to evaluate the program. These scientists called for urgent reforms "immediately," including releasing wolves into the 3.3 million-acre Gila National Forest, which is currently prohibited, and allowing wolves to live outside the recovery area, as well as requiring livestock owners to remove or render inedible (as by lime) the carcasses of non-wolf-killed cattle and horses.

More than 10 years have passed, yet none of these reforms have been enacted. That's why the conservation group I work for filed suit against the government last month to compel the implementation of the 2001 scientific recommendations.

It is our hope that with implementation of these recommendations, the Mexican wolf can still be saved.

The first thing that needs to happen, even before policies are changed, is that Fish and Wildlife needs to use its existing authority to release more captive wolves into the wild, which has not occurred in four years. That would begin to address the Mexican wolf's genetic crisis and give us hope of restoring the wolf's natural role to the Southwest.

In the long run, we hope the Fish and Wildlife Service will take steps to allow Mexican wolves to recolonize a larger area of their former range and serve their important role in shaping Southwest's ecosystems, as well as thrill those who are fortunate enough to hear their mournful howls or see one of these magnificent animals in the wild.