SUMMIT COUNTY CITIZEN VOICE

Slow going for Mexican gray wolf recovery

January 28, 2012 By Bob Berwyn

Conservation advocates call for more releases

SUMMIT COUNTY — The Mexican gray wolf population in the Southwest is hanging on, but continues to struggle partly because not enough wolves are being released from captivity, according to conservation advocates who would like to see federal biologists do more to recover the species.

For the first time since 2006, the overall population grew, from 42 to 50. The government did not remove any wolves from the wild in 2010, but released just one wolf, captured in 2009, back into the wild.

Mexican wolves, the smallest genetically distinct subspecies of the North American gray wolf, were eradicated from their native territory in in the U.S. by 1970. Recovery efforts started with an endangered species listing in 1976. The species was saved from extinction when the last five wild wolves were captured in Mexico to start a captive breeding program.

The first captive-bred wolves were released back into the wild in 1998. The wolf population in the Southwest is designated as experimental and nonessential, which give wildlife managers more flexibility to address livestock depredations.

According to the 2010 annual report from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the 2010 end-of-year count confirmed 23 radio-collared wolves (16 adults, 4 subadults, and 3 pups). The population consisted of 10 packs (4 in Arizona, 6 in New Mexico). Twenty-seven uncollared wolves, including uncollared singles and groups, were documented throughout 2010.

Mexican wolf, M1050. Photo courtesy of the Endangered Wolf Center

Seven packs produced wild-conceived, wild-born litters. This is the ninth consecutive year wild- born Mexican wolves bred and raised pups in the wild. According to the agency, 91 percent of the radio-collared individuals and 96 percent of all documented wolves were wild-born.

But the total population is still far short of what's needed to maintain a self-sustaining population, according to Michael Robinson, with the Center for Biological Diversity.

"Releases of captive Mexican wolves into the wild are few and far between, which is limiting the growth of this important wolf population that suffered for years from federal wolf trapping and shooting," Robinson said, commenting on the latest USFWS report. "On the upside, this report shows that the wolf population can grow – and cows stay safer – if ranchers practice close herding of their livestock."

The Mexican Wolf Recovery Program Progress Report records 18 pups born in the wild in New Mexico and Arizona in 2010, 14 of which lived at least till the end of the year.

The 1998 reintroduction was projected to result in 102 wolves in the wild by 2006. A current count of the number of Mexican wolves in the wild concludes this week, with the resulting official census for 2011 to be released next week.

The 2010 progress report describes efforts to keep wolves and cattle separate. Part of the recovery program budget is spent on hiring local range-riders. According to the report, eight cows were confirmed killed by Mexican wolves in 2010, out of approximately 47,000 cattle permitted to graze on the national forests in the two-state wolf recovery area.

None of the cattle protected by range-riders were killed. This is a lower number of confirmed fatal depredations than recorded for the previous five years. Mexican wolves feed primarily on elk.

The progress report states that "lack of appropriate initial releases and successful translocations from captivity" contributed to "fewer known adult wolves available for pair formation." This acknowledgment was accompanied by a pledge to "replac[e] the individual animals lost through initial releases and translocations."

The Mexican wolf, or "lobo," is the smallest, rarest, southernmost occurring, and most genetically distinct subspecies of the North American gray wolf. It once occurred in the mountainous regions of the Southwest from central Mexico throughout portions of Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona, and perhaps even farther north, as suggested by more recent research.