

# SUMMIT COUNTY CITIZEN VOICE

## Southwest gray wolf population up 3d year in a row

### Numbers still short of recovery goals



February 7, 2013 by Bob Berwyn

FRISCO — Mexican gray wolf numbers are inching toward the target of the long-running \$25 million recovery effort, according to the latest census by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

“The 2012 count of 75 wolves is very exciting. This past year we have implemented a number of management actions – in collaboration with our partners and stakeholders – that have helped reduce conflicts related to recovering a sustainable population of wolves on a working landscape,” said Benjamin Tuggle, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s Southwest regional director.

Pup births the past year brought the total number of wolves in Arizona and New Mexico to 75, up from 58 a year ago and 50 at the beginning of 2011. But the number of breeding pairs has dropped from six to just three pairs.

That drop shows the need for continued introductions, according to wolf conservation advocate Michael Robinson, who has been watch-dogging the recovery program on behalf of the Center for Biological Diversity.

“I’m pleased that the number of Mexican gray wolves has increased for the third year in a row,” Robinson said. “The decrease in the number of breeding pairs, however, is cause for concern.

If wolves are truly going to return and recover in the Southwest, more wolves must be released into the wild.

“The increase in numbers is a sign that the Mexican gray wolf recovery program may finally be seeing some success,” said Robinson. “One likely factor in this improvement is a more hands-off approach by the Fish and Wildlife Service, which has not killed a wolf in response to livestock depredations in five years.”

Tuggle said close collaboration between federal conservation biologists and local partners has reduced wolf-livestock interactions. The agency will try address some of the concerns raised by conservation advocates in future management, he added.

“Our strategy for 2013 will be to increase the genetic viability of the wild population, and implement management activities that support more wolves in the wild,” he said. “Releases are one of the important tools we use for improving the genetic viability of the wild population.”

The Mexican gray wolf is the smallest, southern-most occurring, rarest, and most genetically distinct subspecies of gray wolf in North America. They once occupied habitat throughout the southwestern U.S. and Mexico, but were hunted to near-extinction by the mid-1900s and effectively eliminated from the U.S.

Mexican gray wolves were listed as an endangered species in 1976, prompting recovery efforts that still face opposition from some residents of the area.

Mexican wolves were reintroduced in Arizona and New Mexico in 1998 and were projected to increase to 102 wolves in the wild, including 18 breeding pairs, by the end of 2006. But they have continued to fall well short of these goals likely because of a combination of capture and killing by Fish and Wildlife Service and illegal poaching.

As a result of potential conflicts, the USFWS has tread carefully in the recovery effort, to the point of trying to micro-manage the wide-ranging predators, and perhaps to the detriment of the species' genetic diversity.

During the past six years only 11 captured wolves have been released into the wild, while dozens of other once-wild wolves are in captivity, awaiting release. A wolf that was released just last month was recaptured just a few weeks later.

"Fifteen years after the beginning of the reintroduction program, mismanagement, unnecessary persecution of wolves and political interference in releasing wolves has resulted in just three breeding pairs in the wild and ongoing loss of genetic diversity," Robinson said.

"It's noteworthy that reintroduction of wolves to the northern Rocky Mountains started just three years before the southwestern reintroduction, and at last count there were 106 breeding pairs in the north. We hope this year's increase is the start of the Mexican wolf recovery program finally taking off."

Arizona wildlife officials said rather than releasing more captive-bred wolves, the key to success could be increasing the percentage of the population that is wild-born. By that measure, the latest census is good news, because only one wolf living in the wild was captive-born.

"Wild-born wolves, compared to naïve wolves that were born in captivity, have demonstrated that they are less likely to have human and livestock interactions," said Larry Voyles, director of the Arizona Game and Fish Department.