



Some hope for Mexican gray wolf

By Michael J. Robinson
Conservation Advocate,
Center for Biological Diversity
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Despite the recent death of a Mexican gray wolf, dismally familiar news, two legal settlements signed late last month provide hope for the future of this intelligent, social carnivore native to the Southwest and Mexico.

One settlement agreement between the Center for Biological Diversity and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service protects wolves that may lope northward into our southern borderlands from Mexico.

When Mexican authorities began releasing lobos in 2011, the service issued itself a permit, with no opportunity for public comment, to live-trap and indefinitely incarcerate wolves emanating from the south if viewed as threats to livestock. Ranchers bore no responsibility to take proactive steps to prevent conflicts. Now the service disclaims authority to trap such fully endangered wolves.

The Center for Biological Diversity's second settlement agreement requires the service to finalize by Jan. 12, 2015 its proposed rule authorizing release of captive-bred wolves into the Gila National Forest of New Mexico and allowing wolves to roam over a broader area than presently. For 12 years, the service has promised to change its 1998 reintroduction rule to follow scientific recommendations, but never followed through.

Inbreeding resulting from federal trapping and shooting, and a paucity of new releases of wolves (just two since 2007) is causing fewer pups to be born and to thrive. Last year, just three breeding pairs (parents with two or more pups) survived in the Southwest.

Wolves with more diverse genes live in captivity but may only be released within the Apache National Forest in Arizona, where the best habitats already support territorial wolves. (Wolves captured from the wild may be released in either state, but few actually get their freedoms back.)

Meanwhile millions of acres of the Gila, teeming with elk and deer, remain wolfless.

Another reform would open most of Arizona and New Mexico to wolves. In 1998, the Fish and Wildlife Service bound itself to capture any wolf living wholly outside of the Gila and Apache national forests or contiguous tribal or private lands on which the wolves are specifically welcomed (such as the Fort Apache Indian Reservation in Arizona).

In 2001, a panel of independent biologists reviewing the reintroduction program for the service recommended "immediately" allowing releases in the Gila and letting wolves roam outside of the current boundaries. A 2006 federal-state interagency review concurred. If they receive enough public support, in one year and four months those reforms will finally occur.

Nevertheless, for political reasons, the proposed rule would require removal of any Mexican wolf crossing Interstate 40, thereby preventing establishment of new populations in the southern Rocky Mountains and the Grand Canyon ecosystem – regions that scientists say are necessary for recovery. The proposal would also block southward migration across Interstate 10, hindering the breeding of U.S. Mexican wolves with those from Mexico.

The service is also considering creating new loopholes for shooting wolves, including allowing ranchers to kill any and all wolves – even non-depredating animals – on specified private lands where wolves previously killed livestock.

Designating such wolf-kill zones would reward wolf-haters who leave the carcasses of cattle for wolves to scavenge, leading the wolves to begin hunting stock and other wolves to also pay the price with their lives.

The 2001 scientific panel called it “essential to successful recovery” that livestock owners using public land be required to assume some responsibility for removing livestock carcasses or rendering them inedible, since “scavenging may predispose wolves to eventually prey on livestock.”

Now the public has a chance to weigh in. By testifying at a Fish and Wildlife Service hearing from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. on Oct. 4 at 1000 Woodward Place NE in Albuquerque, you can support changes that will help the Mexican wolf recover.

The science has shown that Mexican gray wolves need trap-free trails, respite from bullets, more mates and more healthy puppies. We owe it to them.