

Courthouse News Service

Activists Claim Victory Defending Gray Wolves

By JONNY BONNER
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CN) - Wildlife officials backed off plans to capture endangered wolves roaming into Arizona and New Mexico, and will instead increase recovery territory there, environmentalists said.

The move comes after the Center for Biological Diversity sued the Secretary of the Interior and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service over a federal permit to trap and capture Mexican gray wolves.

That 2011 permit allegedly stipulated that “endangered wolves that enter Arizona and New Mexico from Mexico or the Northern Rocky Mountains population can be captured or trapped and relocated to the Mexican Wolf Experimental Population Area (where they will be treated for all purposes as part of the nonessential experimental population), returned to Mexico, or placed indefinitely in a captive breeding facility.” (Parentheses in complaint.)

Any wolf found in those states, outside the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area in the Apache National Forest of Arizona and the



Gila National Forest of New Mexico, was subject to the trapping and “indefinite incarceration,” the Tucson-based environmental group added.

It voluntarily dismissed the action Monday after Fish and Wildlife Service announced separate agreements rescinding the plans.

“FWS acknowledges that any removal of a Mexican wolf by FWS is constrained by permit TE-091551-8 and 63 Fed. Reg. 1752 (Jan. 12, 1998), which provides that ‘[i]f a wolf is found in the United States outside the boundaries of the Mexican wolf experimental population area (and not within any other wolf experimental population area) the service will presume it to be of wild origin with full endangered status ... under the Act, unless evidence, such as a radio collar, identification mark, or physical or behavioral traits ... establishes otherwise,’” the five-page filing states.

Fish and Wildlife Service also proposed a change to a 1998 rule for managing roughly 75 wolves that were reintroduced into the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area, a small area in central Arizona and New Mexico.

The change allows for the direct release of wolves into the Gila National Forest, and expands allowed recovery territories to include all of Arizona and New Mexico between Interstate 10 and Interstate 40.

Under the current rule, wolves from a captive pool can only be released in Arizona and are captured if they establish territories outside the current recovery area.

“These agreements should breathe new life into the struggling Mexican wolf recovery program and expand the wolf’s habitat here,” Center for Biological Diversity spokesman Michael Robinson said in a statement. “The Mexican gray wolf is an icon of the Southwest and I’m thrilled it will have better protection.”

Fish and Wildlife Service aimed to have at least 100 Mexican gray wolves in the wild by 2006, the environmental group said, but the program struggled amid illegal shooting, captures in response to livestock conflicts and restrictions on where wolves can be released from captivity.

“We’re glad the Fish and Wildlife Service is finally making much needed changes to the Mexican wolf recovery program but these changes clearly don’t go far enough,” Robinson added. “The science is clear that

if Mexican gray wolves are to have any shot at recovery, they must be allowed to expand and establish population centers beyond what Fish and Wildlife Service has proposed. The Grand Canyon, southern Rockies and borderlands all provide habitat where wolves could be restored. We sure hope the Fish and Wildlife Service will allow wolves to move into these areas.”

The Mexican gray wolf is “one of the rarest and most endangered mammals on the continent,” the Center for Biological Diversity says.

It calculates that only 75 Mexican gray wolves and three Mexican wolf breeding pairs remained in the wild at the beginning of 2013.