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Howl

Fifteen years after returning to the wild, Mexican gray wolves still battle bureaucracy

by Tim Vanderpool

It was amid great fanfare and smoldering trepidation that Mexican gray wolves were released into the wilds of Arizona and New Mexico, mere decades after their near annihilation by the very government now setting them free.

Yet that reintroduction came only after a lawsuit forced the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to finally act, more than 20 years after declaring the animal endangered. And even today the wolf recovery program barely limps along, with any real progress prodded by litigation.

This ambivalent spirit has contributed to mysterious poaching incidents, and perhaps to this spring's unexplained wolf shooting by a staffer with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Wildlife Services.

Adding to the dismal situation, say critics, are Arizona Game and Fish officials who often seem mere lackeys to the cattle-ranching industry, which would like to see wolves removed from the range entirely.

Eva Sargent: "The service needs to release more wolves from captivity." - by Tim Vanderpool

In the past, this ambivalence has also led to boundaries beyond which wolves are not allowed to roam—lest they be removed—and has instituted a dysfunctional management regime that seemed doomed from the start.

As a result, there are currently only 75 Mexican gray wolves in the wild, all sharing a shrinking genetic pool that could seal their fate. Nor does it help that the Fish and Wildlife's progress on a bona fide wolf recovery plan remains mired in stasis. Even the recovery planning team has failed to meet for more than a year, according to team member and Defenders of Wildlife Southwest program director Eva Sargent.

To her, it's high time for Fish and Wildlife to get on the stick. "Immediately, the service needs to release more wolves from captivity," she says. "And I don't mean two or three, to begin this process of genetic rescue.

"Second, they need to finish the recovery plan and implement it. The recovery plan they're operating under right now was written in 1982 and it doesn't have recovery goals. It doesn't have a timeline, it doesn't have any of the things you need to have a road map to recovery. Third they need to move ahead to establish additional populations so that you don't have all your eggs in one basket.

"But they need to start now," Sargent says, "because what they do or don't do now will determine whether Mexican wolves can recover at all."

However, in an email to the Tucson Weekly, Fish and Wildlife spokeswoman Charna Lefton describes plenty of progress. She writes that the "the Planning Subgroup of the Recovery Team met in December 2012. The SPS has continued to develop recommended recovery criteria during this time."

Lefton also denies that her agency has been ambivalent about reintroduction from the start.

"Absolutely not!" she writes. "Service leadership and staff at the local, regional and national levels have strongly and consistently supported this recovery effort. As noted in the 2012 annual count, the population has shown a steady increase in numbers over the last 3 years, from a minimum of 50 in 2010 to 75 in 2012."

But any progress at all belies underlying friction among government agencies. That became clear in 2008, with the disbanding of what was called the Mexican Wolf Adaptive Management Oversight Committee, or AMOC. That dissolution came on the heels of another lawsuit aimed at halting strict enforcement of Standard Operating Procedure 13. Better known as SOP 13, the policy dictated numerous reasons that wolves could be yanked from the wild, including cattle depredation and straying from the recovery area boundaries.

During the time SOP 13 was in place—from 2003 to 2009—wolf populations suffered, in fact falling to a mere 40 animals by the time it was halted. Wolves removed under the program also included a number of genetically critical animals.

To detractors, the disbanding of AMOC—which they viewed as terribly dysfunctional—was no great loss, since its tortured recommendations came from a sprawling committee comprised of federal, state and tribal officials. It subsequently diluted Fish and Wildlife's responsibility towards wolf management, since Arizona Game and Fish was AMOC's lead agency.

Consider that in March, Arizona Game and Fish commissioners even voted in support of efforts to yank gray wolves from the endangered species list—including the embattled Mexican gray wolf.

Still, it seems that Arizona Game and Fish officials don't share the view that dissolving AMOC was a good thing at all. Even today, the department grouses over its diminished role after the dissolution of the group.

That indignation emerged with wrangling over new wolf releases, to which Game and Fish may reluctantly be forced to accede. The Arizona Game and Fish Commission sets policy for the department. And the commission "has expressed its view that release of Mexican gray wolves for the foreseeable future should be limited to replacements for wolves that have been lost," says assistant department director Larry Riley.

As for removal of wolves venturing outside the recovery area or preying on livestock—a practice heavily criticized by wolf advocates—Riley concedes that "U.S. Fish and Wildlife has now reserved the final decision of (removing) problematic wolves for themselves."

Game and Fish has also resisted stronger efforts aimed at forcing ranchers to be more responsible about removing cattle carcasses from the range. The carcasses are often fed upon by wolves, who might get errantly blamed for the kill, or become habituated to preying on livestock.

But to Riley, coming down hard on the cattlemen makes little sense. "If you're a public lands rancher and someone expects you to remove a calf or cow carcass from way out yonder," he says, "people have to think about the feasibility of that."

Yet with the April 11 resignation of Game and Fish Commission Chairman Jack Husted—representing rural northeastern Arizona, and considered by many to be a lapdog for the cattle growers—the tide of Arizona's grumbling participation may start to change.

But will it be too late to matter, as genetic diversity required for maintaining a viable wolf population teeters on the brink?

Even as that possibility looms, the federal Fish and Wildlife Service seems to be twiddling its thumbs, while Arizona Game and Fish continues pretending that it actually wants the program to succeed. That's according to Michael Robinson, a conservation advocate with the Center for Biological Diversity.

"Arizona Game and Fish can wax poetic about supporting the wolf," he says. "But that's a distraction. Because when you look at the actual record, you have scientists saying this species is on a downward spiral, and in trouble genetically because of lack of releases and removals.

"Then you look at what Game and Fish has attempted to accomplish, and the record is simply at odds with any kind of pleasant-sounding homilies about supporting wolves. This is an agency that is trying to fulfill the livestock industry's longstanding efforts to exterminate the Mexican gray wolf."