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Gray wolf population increases 10%

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The Southwest's wild population of Mexican gray wolves grew in 2013 but those trying to protect the endangered animals say their gene pool remains weak, a threat to their long-term survival.

The latest year-end count showed a minimum of 83 wolves in the wild, up more than 10 percent from a count of 75 wolves in 2012. It's an increase for a fourth year running and the most wolves counted in the wild since a program to reintroduce the species began in 1998, according to Benjamin Tuggle, southwest regional director of the Fish and Wildlife Service.

"The wolves are teaching us as much as we are trying to manage them," he said. "We're hoping that the combination between science and trying to minimize wolf-human interactions will keep us on a positive trajectory."

Some 46 wolves were found roaming in New Mexico's Gila National Forest and 37 others were counted in Arizona's Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest and Fort Apache Indian Reservation. At least seven of the 14 known wolf packs produced wild-born pups, 17 of which survived to the end of the year.

Yet many of these wolves are related to each other, said Maggie Dwire, FWS assistant recovery coordinator for the Mexican wolf program, and that can hurt litter size and survival rates at breeding time. She said the best way to diversify the gene pool is by releasing wolves bred in captivity into the wild.

"Releasing animals to the wild helps both the wild and captive populations," she said.

The FWS has only released one "new" wolf – an animal that has lived only in captivity – since 2008. The FWS said it plans to release four wolves into the wild in 2014, including two new females. Those females will be bred with two males captured from the wild and set free as pairs.

"It's still alarming that there are only five breeding pairs in the world in the wild today," said Michael Robinson, conservation advocate for the Center for Biological Diversity. "The number of breeding pairs is a reflection of the dire genetic straits that Mexican wolves face both in the wild and to a lesser extent in captivity."

A "breeding pair" is defined as a couple that produces at least two surviving pups. A pair that produces one pup, or in which one adult dies is not considered a breeding pair in the end-of-year census.

A long-running government-sanctioned extermination program nearly brought the Mexican gray wolf to extinction until federal policy shifted in the 1970s. Seven surviving wolves were captured in Mexico

and Arizona and were bred in captivity until their reintroduction began in 1998.

Last year, gains in the wild were offset by losses. Four wolves were illegally killed, and another four wolves were removed from the wild.

“We’re on the doorstep of a tremendous conservation success,” said Jim deVos, assistant director for Arizona Game and Fish’s Wildlife Management Division.