



## New round in fight over wolves Hearings on plan to broaden reintroduction area start this week

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Another battle is beginning over the real New Mexico lobos.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will start public hearings this week on whether Mexican gray wolves can be released directly into New Mexico's Gila National Forest.

Only about 75 Mexican gray wolves live in the wilds of New Mexico and Arizona. Under existing federal rule, lobo reintroductions are limited to a part of Arizona that is in the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area.

The Center for Biological Diversity seven years ago sued the federal government to broaden the reintroduction range, arguing that this would reduce inbreeding and enable the Mexican wolf population to grow. Because of the suit, fish and wildlife executives agreed to consider the proposal.



Cattle growers and others in the livestock industry oppose expanding the area where lobos can be set free. They say the Mexican gray wolf is a predator costly to ranchers and dangerous to residents of rural areas.

Michael Robinson, of the Center for Biological Diversity, said Mexican wolves have struggled to reproduce because of too many government restrictions.

"The real urgency behind this is stopping the inbreeding. Direct release of families of wolves in New Mexico would strengthen the population," he said.

The federal rule keeping New Mexico off-limits as a direct point of release for wolves dates to 1998. But some of the 75 Mexican gray wolves live in the Gila or other parts of New Mexico, having crossed the Arizona line.

Federal records show that the Fish and Wildlife Service expected 18 breeding pairs of Mexican wolves in the wild by 2006. Today, only three breeding pairs exist, Robinson said.

The proposed rule change would require capture of wolves that rove beyond the borders of Interstates 10 and 40.

This means Mexican gray wolves would be prevented from entering the Grand Canyon, southern Rockies and borderlands.

The first hearing of Fish and Wildlife's two hearings will be from 6 to 9 p.m. Wednesday at the Embassy Suites at 1000 Woodward Place NE in Downtown Albuquerque. Another will be from 6 to 8:30 p.m. Dec. 3 at the Hon-Dah Resort near Pinetop, Ariz., at the edge of the Fort Apache Indian Reservation.

A decision on whether wolves could be reintroduced directly in New Mexico would be issued by Jan. 12, 2015.