

Wolf population increases to 83

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Terence Corrigan - The Independent



Photo courtesy of U.S. Fish and Wildlife

An Interagency Field Team member carries a sedated wolf during the January 2013 population survey.

ALBUQUERQUE — The population of Mexican gray wolves has reached its highest level since the reintroduction program released the first wolves 16 years ago near Alpine.

The Interagency Field Team recently completed its annual count and determined that the minimum number of Mexican wolves is 83 – 43 in New Mexico and 37 in Arizona. The population of wolves in the wild has nearly doubled in the last four years.

The count was 75 in January 2013, and 58 in 2012.

In 2013, seven packs produced 17 pups that survived through December.

The gain in wolf numbers was offset by seven deaths, four were killed illegally.

The official number is expressed as the “minimum count” because it’s a number they’re sure of. It’s entirely likely that there are additional animals that were not seen. Preparation for the annual survey begins in September and October on the ground with field team members confirming locations of animals that are fitted with telemetry collars. In January the official count begins with an aerial telemetry survey from an airplane. The airplane survey is followed by a visual count from a helicopter.

The field team currently has a pair of wolves in a pen in the forest and plans to release them sometime in the early spring. There is also a pair being held in captivity that Fish and Wildlife plans to release this year.

The management policy now is to release only a pair with newly born pups which tends to keep them near the release site. In the past newly released single animals have bolted from the release site and strayed far outside the boundaries where wolves are currently allowed to be.

All of the wolves counted were born in the wild, which program personnel say bodes well for success.

Wild born pups “seem to have what it takes to survive ... and not get into trouble as relates to human interactions,” said Dr. Benjamin Tuggle, Southwest Regional Director of U.S. Fish and Wildlife.

Jim DeVos, assistant director of Game and Fish’s Wildlife Management Division, echoed Tuggle’s optimism during a teleconference Jan. 31.

“The fact that we now have wild wolves for the entire population we think is a huge success,” DeVos said. Wild wolves, he said, “just seem to be more adept at making a living.... The fact that we’ve had three years in a row with improvements in the population numbers is big. It seems like the Moon and the Sun and the stars are aligning... We are truly on the doorstep of tremendous conservation success.”

There is also praise for the program coming from the environmental community but it’s tempered by a call for Fish and Wildlife to establish new populations in the Grand Canyon area and the southern Rockies and more releases of wolves being held in captivity.

“The continued increase in wolf numbers is a big relief. But much more still needs to be done to recover these highly endangered and beautiful animals to sustainable levels,” according to Michael Robinson with the Center for Biological Diversity. Robinson quoted reaction to the announcement on the population increase was in a Jan. 31 news release.