

# New Mexico Game Commission to rejoin federal wolf program

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A female Mexican gray wolf runs in the Sevilleta National Wildlife Refuge in Central New Mexico in 2011. The New Mexico State Game Commission voted unanimously Friday to rejoin the Mexican Wolf Recovery Program, allowing the state commission more discretion over efforts meant to rebuild the wolf population. Associated Press file photo

A New Mexico wildlife commission has voted to rejoin a pact with the federal government to protect the endangered Mexican wolf.

The New Mexico State Game Commission decided unanimously Friday to rejoin the Mexican Wolf Recovery Program, allowing the state commission more discretion over conservation efforts meant to rebuild the wolf population. New Mexico had been part of the recovery program from 1998 until 2011, when the commission voted to abandon the recovery effort under former Republican Gov. Susana Martinez.

Stewart Liley, chief of wildlife management division for the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, said being part of the effort gives the state more management authority “rather than a passive role.”

The Mexican wolf is the rarest gray wolf subspecies on the continent, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. It nearly became extinct in the 1970s.

Environmental groups responded to the news with cautious optimism Monday.

Senior Conservation Advocate Michael Robinson at the Center for Biological Diversity called it “a procedural move” and said he’s reserving judgment about what this means for Mexican wolves until he sees how the state tries to shape recovery efforts.

“We’re delighted that the anti-wolf agenda of the Martinez administration is a thing of the past, but we’re seeing a game commission that is still willing to continue trapping,” Robinson said, adding that this is still destructive to the wolf population.

“What the wolves badly need is an advocate in the state government for keeping them in the wild, not removing them despite the political pressure, and stopping the ongoing federal trapping and shooting program and resuming the release of family packs of wolves ... to address a growing genetic crisis.”

Robinson and other environmentalists are critical of the federal government for not allowing entire wolf families bred in captivity to be released into the wild. He and other conservationists say the few wolves released back into the wild each year has led to a wolf population that is too genetically similar after years of inbreeding.

The policy comes as a result of pressure from the livestock industry, which can lose cattle to wolves, environmentalists say.

Liley of Game and Fish said the reason the federal government doesn’t allow whole wolf families to be released is that adult wolves have “a very low survival rate” and in the past were often “killed or brought back because of nuisance behavior,” such as eating dog food from people’s porches or killing livestock.

Mary Katherine Ray, wildlife chairwoman of the Sierra Club’s Rio Grande chapter, praised the move to rejoin the recovery program. She said it “appears that the game commission is recognizing the legitimacy of bringing wolves back,” but said the on-the-ground difference remains to be seen.

Defenders of Wildlife Representative Michael Dax said the decision to rejoin the federal wolf pact grants greater influence in recovery efforts. For example, Dax said it specifically gives the head of the State Game Commission direct authority over whether more than 12 Mexican wolf pups could be released into the wild each year.

That could also make recovery decisions happen faster, with the commission director able to make some decisions without waiting for the full commission to meet. The full commission meets seven times a year.

Liley said the State Game Commission has recommended striking the hard cap on the number of pups that can be introduced into the wild each year.