

The Recovery of the “Lobo”



Mexican Wolves: A Success Story in the Making

History

The Mexican gray wolf, or “lobo,” once roamed throughout the Southwest in Arizona, New Mexico, Texas and south into central Mexico. The lobo was common in this region up to the mid-1800s. All of that changed, however, once heavy European settlement spread to the West. Wolves were trapped, shot, clubbed and poisoned by both government agents and private individuals. By the mid-1900s, the lobo had been almost completely exterminated from the United States, with populations in Mexico severely reduced. By the early 1970s, the lobo was nearly extinct.

The Mexican wolf was listed as an endangered species in 1976. Between 1977 and 1980, a trapper with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (the Service) captured the last known wild Mexican wolves in the world – four males and a pregnant female. These last few wolves allowed the Service to embark on a captive breeding program involving more than 40 North American zoos that has successfully helped reintroduce the Mexican gray wolf into the wild.

After considering many possible locations for their initial reintroduction, in March of 1998 the Service released three family groups of Mexican wolves into the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area (BRWRA) within the Apache National Forest in eastern Arizona. These wolves adapted well, forming packs, establishing territories and reproducing, bringing back an ecological balance to the region. Lobos were once again howling in Arizona and New Mexico.

A Bumpy Road to Recovery

Recent polls show that a remarkable 86 percent of Arizonans believe the Mexican wolf brings a natural balance to the Southwest landscape. Wolf recovery efforts, however, have stalled.



In 1991, the World Conservation Union declared the Mexican wolf the most endangered wolf subspecies in the world.

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The Service has reintroduced almost 100 Mexican wolves over the years, but only about 60 can be found in the wild today. Despite the ease with which they have taken to their new home and reproduced, numerous factors prevent the lobo from establishing enough stable, healthy packs to thrive in the long term.

Why the wolves are not thriving:

- There are millions of acres of public land in the Southwest where Mexican gray wolves could thrive. Unfortunately, the wolves are required to stay within a small recovery area. Wolves that establish territories outside the invisible boundary lines are captured and moved, whether or not they cause conflicts. The constant relocation of wolves disrupts pack social structure and thwarts population growth. The arbitrary boundary lines are the single biggest barrier to Mexican gray wolf recovery.
- The 25-year-old recovery plan is so outdated that it lacks specific goals for the population, benchmarks to measure progress, timelines for recovery and criteria for removing

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Mexican wolves from the endangered species list.

- The Mexican gray wolf is one of the most endangered animals in the world. Despite the rarity of these animals and their importance to restoring balance to Southwest forests, wolves are routinely shot or sent back to captivity for killing cattle. As a result, more than 20 wolves have been destroyed or removed in less than a decade. With so few wolves, each member of a pack is important. Until wolf numbers rebound to sustainable levels, program managers need to prioritize keeping wolves alive and do everything possible to prevent the unnecessary deaths of individual wolves.



Jim Clark/U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Livestock and Wolves Can Coexist

Farmers and ranchers are natural stewards, and part of being a good steward is sharing the land with wildlife. Wolves and livestock have successfully coexisted throughout the world for tens of thousands of years, but coexistence takes work. While the number of livestock preyed upon by wolves is minimal, these losses can have a significant economic impact on those ranchers who do experience chronic wolf predation.

Ranchers play a critical role in ensuring the long-term success of the Mexican gray wolf. In view of this, Defenders created the Bailey Wildlife Foundation Wolf Compensation Trust, which

reimburses ranchers for livestock lost to wolves, and the Bailey Wildlife Foundation Proactive Carnivore Conservation Fund, which supports ranchers' efforts to avoid conflicts with wolves through projects like fencing, guard dogs, range riders and livestock relocation.

Next Steps in the Recovery Effort

Mexican gray wolves have made a remarkable comeback, but a course correction is needed to move forward. The upcoming scoping hearings, the first step in the process of changing the rules governing the project, provide a rare opportunity to ensure we learn from the mistakes of the past and advance solutions that will help Mexican gray wolves reach a sustainable population. By working together, we can ensure that Mexican gray wolves once again restore a balance to the Southwest's wild country.

Defenders and other conservation organizations advocate for the following changes to the Mexican wolf program:

- **Allow wolves to roam beyond the current artificial boundaries to find suitable habitat and prey.**
- **Resolve livestock-wolf conflicts in ways that keep wolves in the wild and achieve progress towards reintroduction objectives.**
- **Revise the Fish and Wildlife Service's 25-year-old recovery plan.**
- **Allow for opportunities to expand wolf reintroduction to other appropriate areas in the future.**

YOU CAN PARTICIPATE in the scoping hearings either by attending or by emailing your comments to r2fwe_al@fws.gov before Dec. 31, 2007.