



NEWS

from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

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U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE RECOMMENDS REINTRODUCTION OF "EXPERIMENTAL" POPULATION OF MEXICAN WOLF; NO DECISION YET ON WHETHER TO PROCEED

The Mexican gray wolf, now extinct in the wild in the United States, would be reintroduced to part of its historic range on public lands in Arizona and New Mexico under a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recommendation released today. Under the Service's plan, the wolves would be classified as a "nonessential experimental" population under the Endangered Species Act, a provision that would allow the wolves to be managed with fewer restrictions than those normally covering endangered species.

The recommendation to reintroduce wolves on public lands is the "preferred alternative" in a final environmental impact statement issued by the Fish and Wildlife Service on December 19, 1996.

No decision on whether to proceed with the Service's proposal will be made until after completion of a required 30-day public review period on the final environmental impact statement. After the review period, Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt will issue a final "record of decision."

If the plan is approved, Mexican wolves would be released first in eastern Arizona in the Apache National Forest and allowed to disperse into the Gila National Forest in New Mexico. The combined Apache and Gila national forests comprise the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area, which includes portions of Apache and Greenlee counties in Arizona and portions of Catron, Grant, and Sierra counties in New Mexico. If deemed necessary and feasible, other wolves could later be released into the White Sands Wolf Recovery Area (on the White Sands Missile Range), which includes portions of Dona Ana, Lincoln, Otero, and Socorro counties in New Mexico.

Under this plan, the wolf recovery areas will include only public lands. If wolves move beyond the recovery area boundaries onto private or Tribal lands, they would be removed unless the land managers want to allow them to remain.

If a decision is made to proceed with reintroduction, the first release of wolves could occur about 1 year after the decision.

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The wolves that would be released would come from a captive population maintained in zoos, wildlife sanctuaries, and other facilities in the United States and Mexico.

The reintroduction proposal for the Mexican gray wolf contains no land-use restrictions or prohibitions on private and Tribal lands and no major restrictions on public lands. Outside the few small areas on public lands where temporary restrictions might be imposed to protect denning wolves, for example, traditional uses such as logging, grazing, mining, military activities, and hunting would be unaffected by the Mexican gray wolf reintroduction.

The recovery objective is to re-establish 100 wild wolves across more than 5,000 square miles by about the year 2005. The Service and its partners will monitor, evaluate, and manage the wolves, including moving those that leave the recovery areas or cause significant conflict, such as harming livestock.

The "nonessential experimental" designation proposed for the wolves was recently used for the California condors reintroduced into northern Arizona and has been successfully used for the gray wolves reintroduced into Yellowstone National Park and Idaho. No critical habitat may be proposed for experimental populations and, generally, Endangered Species Act restrictions would be fewer than usually required for listed species.

A wolf that is killed, for example as a result of automobile collisions or military training, would not be a violation of the law when it is incidental to a legal activity and is promptly reported. In addition, wolves may be killed in defense of human life or by ranchers if the wolves are attacking livestock on their property.

The Mexican wolf, also known as the "lobo," is among the smallest of North American gray wolves. Adults weight 50 to 90 pounds, average 4-1/2 to 5-1/2 feet in total length, and reach 26 to 32 inches in height at the shoulder. Its pelt color varies. It is genetically distinct from all other wolves and is one of the rarest subspecies of gray wolf in the world. Intensive predator removal efforts from the late 1800s to the mid-1900s extirpated this wolf from the U.S. portion of its range. Its status in Mexico is uncertain but there have been no documented sightings since 1980. It was listed as "endangered" under the U.S. Endangered Species Act in 1976. There are currently 149 Mexican gray wolves in captivity.

The recommendation to reintroduce Mexican wolves follows an extensive period of review and public comment. A public scoping process began in 1991, followed by a draft environmental impact statement issued in June 1995. Seventeen public meetings were

held and more than 18,000 comments on the draft environmental impact statement were received. These comments were analyzed, summarized, and are responded to in the final environmental impact statement.

A proposed rule to designate the Mexican wolves as a "nonessential experimental" population was published in June 1996 and the Service held four public meetings and accepted written comments on the proposed rule. Those comments will be considered and a final rule published if the Service's proposal for reintroduction is approved by the Department of the Interior.

Copies of the final environmental impact statement, "Reintroduction of the Mexican Wolf within its Historic Range in the Southwestern United States," may be obtained from Regional Director (attention: Mexican Wolf Recovery Coordinator), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, P.O. Box 1306, Albuquerque, New Mexico 87103-1306 (phone: 505-248-6920).