

# **Mexican Wolf Recovery Program Standard Operating Procedure**

**Title:** Initial Releases and Translocations of Mexican Wolves

**Number:** 6.1

**File Name:** MW SOP 6.1\_Final\_10302024.docx

## **Purpose:**

This Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) describes the process for proposing, approving, and facilitating translocations and initial releases (including release/translocation sites) of Mexican wolves on lands within the Mexican Wolf Experimental Population Area (MWEPA) other than those within designated Tribal trust land. This SOP represents, in part, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife “Service-approved management plan” referenced in the 2022 Revised Experimental Population Rule (2022 10(j) Rule, 50 CFR 17.84(k)).

## **Exceptions:**

Approved exception to this SOP:

- (1) When necessary for management purposes (e.g., Mexican wolves outside of the 10(j) boundary, or to compensate for a wolf mortality with genetically more diverse animals, or enhance genetics of the wild population through placement of more genetically diverse pups in a den through fostering) the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the jurisdictional state agency (i.e., Arizona Game and Fish Department [AZGFD] or New Mexico Department of Game and Fish [NMDGF]):
  - a. May make an initial release or translocation in Zone 1 and, to a more limited degree, within Zone 2 of the MWEPA (see 2022 10(j) Rule), within 5 miles of an area that is currently or was previously occupied by an established pack or elements of an established pack.
    - i. Areas within both Zone 1 and Zone 2 may be limited for initial release and translocations based on the phase of implementation as outlined in the 2022 10(j) Rule.
    - ii. Initial releases and translocations will be conducted in accordance with Procedure 7b of this SOP.
      1. Fostering (placement of more genetically diverse young pups <15 days old from captivity into wild dens) do not appreciably change the distribution or impact of wolves on the landscape. Each fostering event requires complex coordination of logistics between the captive and wild Recovery Programs and can fail to be executed for a wide variety of reasons. Thus, the MT authorizes the IFT to plan and conduct fostering as logistical constraints allow in accordance with exception 1(a).
      2. Fostering will occur at den locations and is not restricted by the location (e.g., distance to town or year around resident) because dens are naturally chosen by the wolves.
      3. Fostering efforts will be summarized in a single news release at the end of the season rather than for each potential fostering attempt which may or may not be executed as outlined in Procedure 7b.

- b. May make an initial release or translocation within 5 miles of an area previously approved for initial release or translocation.
  - c. In addition, the appropriate land management agency personnel (e.g., the U.S. Forest Service liaison on Forest Service land) with support from the jurisdictional IFT lead shall notify local livestock owners (within 3 miles), local county officials, and the local U.S. Forest Service (USFS) District Ranger or Bureau of Land Management (BLM) office within 48 hours of any releases that occurred as a result of exceptions 1(a) and 1(b) above.
- (2) Initial releases and translocations of Mexican wolves may also be made onto any Tribal lands within the MWEPA with advanced approval from the appropriate Tribal authority. For instance, initial releases and translocations on the Fort Apache Indian Reservation are subject to decision-making processes and approval of the White Mountain Apache Tribe (WMAT) rather than this SOP. The release of information about initial releases and translocations also requires coordination and approval by the appropriate Tribal authority.

The USFWS Regional Director must approve any additional exceptions to this SOP.

**Background:**

Initial releases and translocations are essential to Mexican wolf management and recovery. Each initial release and translocation of Mexican wolves requires substantial coordination among, and input from, all parties involved in the Mexican Wolf Recovery Program (Recovery Program). Each proposed event requires careful planning and discussion among all partners. These partners include members of the MT, IFT, captive breeding program, primary land management agency (e.g., USFS, BLM), other stakeholders, and the public. IFT Leads will initiate the process by developing an annual Initial Release/Translocation proposal (IRT Proposal) that identifies related management actions and operational locations within the MWEPA.

Translocations involve moving a Mexican wolf for management purposes from one wild location to another. Mexican wolves that travel outside of the MWEPA or require translocation for other management purposes will be considered for translocation onto federal land within Zones 1 and 2 of the MWEPA in accordance with the 2022 10(j) Rule. Most translocations of adult wolves will be single animals and can occur anywhere within Zone 1 or 2 as a hard release (i.e., a release directly from a transport crate) under the exceptions above, because translocations need to occur quickly in response to a management action. The IFT, however, may also recommend that translocations of single wolf or group of wolves from a temporary holding facility be conducted at a previously established release site via routine procedures outlined below.

Initial releases involve the release of captive wolves that have no previous experience in the wild. The goal of initial releases has shifted with growth in the population of Mexican wolves within the MWEPA. When the population was small, initial releases were necessary to establish a wild population. More recently, initial releases are conducted to achieve population genetic objectives as described in the 2022 Mexican Wolf Recovery Plan, Second Revision. The IFT will focus on fostering (considered an initial release when the pup is from captivity) in the future because past efforts (2014-2023) have been successful and present an opportunity to accomplish

genetic goals, while eliminating nuisance behavior that could be observed during initial release of adult wolves.

Fostering involves placing pups (<15 days old) from a donor litter into a recipient litter with similar aged pups. Fostering is considered an initial release when donor pups are born in captivity and a translocation when donor pups are born in the wild. Fostering opportunities require donor and recipient litters to be born within days of one another and can be logistically challenging as these litters are often a considerable distance apart (e.g., we have previously fostered from captive facilities as far away as New York, Missouri, and Illinois). Fostering does not appreciably change the distribution or population of wolves on the landscape. Captive-born pups placed into wild Mexican wolf dens, however, will be of a different genetic profile than existing wolf packs and increases the gene diversity of the wild wolf population. Because of the short planning window, and because fostering does not change the distribution of wolves on the landscape, these types of releases will be conducted under the exceptions above.

### **Procedures:**

1. Developing a suite of proposed release sites for potential use during implementation of the Recovery Program:
  - a. The USFWS Field Coordinator, with assistance from the IFT Leads (AZGFD, NMDGF, and WMAT) and the USFS liaison, shall identify and review release sites of Mexican wolves in Zone 1 and 2 of the MWEPA.
    - i. IFT Leads will share newly proposed release sites within their respective agencies, as appropriate, for approval to consider as a potential location for future releases.
  - b. The IFT will consult with the USFS Liaison to ensure compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), and any applicable site permitting processes on USFS land. New construction or installment of release pens and other equipment may require additional compliance and a longer period for authorization.
    - i. Existing sites may require reauthorization from the USFS, as determined by the corresponding permit and/or NEPA analysis.
    - ii. Authorization by the USFS may be required for:
      - (1) Assembling of a mesh pen, with minimal ground disturbance (stakes to hold the mesh pen down).
      - (2) Camping in the general area to monitor the wolves while they are in the mesh pen and following release ( $\leq 30$  days of camping).
    - iii. Authorizations by the USFS are issued for structures and use of a release site, but do not authorize the release of wolves or analyze for the presence of Mexican wolves in an area. Releases are conducted under the authority of the USFWS and analyzed in the 2014 Environmental Impact Statement.
  - c. Releases sites on other federal land ownership (i.e., BLM, National Park Service, USFWS) may require similar levels of consultation and site permitting processes, if proposed in the future.
2. Preparing an annual IRT Proposal and review/approval process:
  - a. The USFWS Field Coordinator shall identify, with assistance from the IFT Leaders and USFS liaison, potential foster recipient packs, and release sites for detailed analysis during the year from the suite of available sites identified in procedure 1.

- b. General plans for fostering pups and other potential initial release and translocation alternatives shall be proposed in writing by mid-September of the year prior to implementation, which will include an analysis of the sites identified in procedure 2a and included in an annual IRT Proposal ([Click Here](#)).
  - c. Each annual IRT Proposal shall be fully discussed and vetted within the IFT as it is drafted. Every effort shall be made within the IFT to reach consensus among the members on each element of the proposal.
  - d. The IFT shall submit the draft IRT Proposal to MT for agency review, including any required discussion within scheduled MT meeting(s).
  - e. MT shall provide comment to the IFT through the USFWS Field Coordinator to indicate concurrence, suggestions or requests for revision, and/or disagreement with the proposal within 14 days following distribution to the MT.
  - f. The USFWS Field Coordinator shall coordinate IFT consideration of MT comments, and appropriate revision of the proposal which will be submitted to the Executive Committee for review by mid-October.
  - g. The Executive Committee will review the proposal, request changes as needed prior to approval by the USFWS Regional Director.
  - h. Following USFWS Regional Director approval, the proposal shall be shared and reviewed through the following process (in order):
    - i. The USFS liaison (or other land management agency staff as appropriate) will inform appropriate Forest Supervisors, District Rangers, and USFS staff of the decision.
    - ii. The appropriate land management agency personnel (e.g., the U.S. Forest Service liaison on Forest Service land) with support from the jurisdictional IFT lead will notify local permittees within 5 miles of the proposed release location.
    - iii. Post on the USFWS website by the end of November of the year prior to implementation ([Click Here](#)).
    - iv. Implemented in the following year.
  - i. Public information officers shall then appropriately coordinate associated public outreach efforts to inform the public of the decision (see Step 7).
3. Selecting Mexican wolves for release:
- a. Fostering has become the primary method for releases.
    - i. Fostering is based on the timing of the birth of wolf pups in captivity (initial release) and in the wild (translocation).
    - ii. Pups from the donor litter should be a similar age to the recipient litter ( $\leq 7$  days) and should be placed in the recipient litters den  $< 15$  days of birth. Thus, this type of release is primarily based on the synchronicity of the donor and recipient litters.
    - iii. In addition to synchronicity, we consider the following for recipient litters:
      - (1) Breeding history (e.g., litter sizes, first time breeding female, experience helping to raise pups),
      - (2) Helper presence in the pack,
      - (3) History of depredations in the pack,
      - (4) History of nuisance behavior in the pack,
      - (5) Logistical difficulty of conducting the foster event and supplementally feeding the pack, and
      - (6) Genetic characteristics of the donor and recipient pack.

- b. In determining which wolves will be selected for release when conducting releases with an adult(s) component, the following factors shall be evaluated:
    - i. Previous behavior of the Mexican wolf. If an animal with past problem or nuisance behavior is being considered for release, evaluate whether such behavior might be likely at the new location,
    - ii. Reproductive history of parents,
    - iii. Breeding potential,
    - iv. Genetic contribution to the wild population,
    - v. Sex and age,
    - vi. Prior behavior in captivity, and
    - vii. Health.
  - c. In determining the number of Mexican wolves when conducting releases with an adult(s) component, the following factors shall be evaluated:
    - i. Prey density and distribution,
    - ii. Proximity to other wolves,
    - iii. Logistical support required and available to execute operations, and
    - iv. Desired pack composition (e.g., sex ratio, ages, and genetics).
- 4. Evaluation of release methods and alternatives:
  - a. Hard release – Direct release of a Mexican wolf or wolves from crates into the wild or into a fladry enclosure constructed of rope with attached flagging.
    - i. These types of releases do not require a permit from USFS and include fostering efforts.
  - b. Soft release – Use of a pen designed to hold Mexican wolves up to several months in order to acclimate them to a specific area. Such pens are typically chain-link or soft plastic and constructed with (as appropriate) electrified or non-electrified mesh.
    - i. The IFT will almost exclusively utilize a soft plastic pen for soft releases due to the ease of setup and lack of observed benefit in the success of releases from a chain link pen.
    - ii. Additional coordination with the USFS, or other federal land management agency, may be required if the IFT develops a proposal that incorporates the use of a chain link pen (see procedure 1).
- 5. Evaluation of timing of releases:
  - a. Releases may occur any time during the year. However, consideration must be given to the following factors in an effort to maximize success and minimize/mitigate any adverse potential impacts or consequences that may accompanying proposed operations:
    - i. Weather and snow cover,
    - ii. The wolves' reproductive cycle,
    - iii. Presence and vulnerability of native prey,
    - iv. Presence and timing of livestock operations,
    - v. Hunting seasons, and
    - vi. Recreational and other uses.
- 6. Evaluation of release areas identified in the proposal:
  - a. Releases sites must consider and meet the following factors:

- i. Located 5 or more miles from a town,
  - ii. Located 3 or more miles from a dwelling occupied year-round,
  - iii. Located 3 or more miles from Zone 1 boundaries, as restricted by the phase of implementation (see 2022 10(j) Rule),
  - iv. Located 3 or more miles from Tribal boundaries (without Tribal approval), and
  - v. Located in areas of adequate prey densities (e.g. elk, deer, and other native ungulates), based on the best available information from the appropriate state or Tribal wildlife agency.
- b. All release site proposals and accompanying evaluations shall also consider and address:
- i. Previous use of proposed sites, if any, and an evaluation of outcomes from such previous use/attempts,
  - ii. Presence of other Mexican wolves,
  - iii. Presence of humans—all permanent human presence within 5 miles of the release site shall be evaluated,
  - iv. Presence of livestock—all livestock use within 5 miles of the release site shall be evaluated, and all release sites should be as far away as possible from active livestock calving pastures,
  - v. Recreational uses in the area—avoid conflicts when possible,
  - vi. Access to the area and security of the location—consider how much public use occurs (release pens should be safe from human intrusion), but also consider the ease of logistical (management) access by the IFT,
  - vii. Habitat and site topography,
  - viii. Availability of water—year-round access to water within 2 miles of the release site is preferred, but water is not a decision criterion for releases,
  - ix. Expected need for supplemental feeding and monitoring, and
  - x. Expected need for temporary area closures—proposals may recommend closure of areas within a 1-mile radius of where a release pen would be set up, for protection of wolves that will be temporarily restrained in the pen and might use the pen area immediately post-release.

7. Completing public outreach for approved releases:

- a. The appropriate land management agency personnel (e.g., the U.S. Forest Service liaison on Forest Service land) with support from the jurisdictional IFT lead shall notify (by phone, email, or personal visit) local livestock permittees (i.e. those within 5 miles of the proposed release site), a local county official (i.e., the county in which the release occurred), and the local District Ranger at the time of approval by the USFWS and jurisdictional state agency, but not less than 10 calendar days prior to the release.
- b. As appropriate, the USFWS and jurisdictional state agency shall collaborate in developing and ultimately issuing a general news release, with copies to the local county government (i.e., the county in which the release occurred), that should occur within 7 calendar days following each release.

**Approvals:**

The Interagency Field Team developed, the Management Team and the Executive Committee reviewed, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Regional Director approved this SOP on October 30, 2024.

**References:**

None