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Thanks to all who helped Monica prepare this piece. Please pass it on.

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Federal Proposal Seeks To Expand Mexican Gray Wolf Recovery Zone

By [Mónica Ortiz Uribe](#)

August 19, 2014

Audio Clip

[Federal Proposal Seeks To Expand Mexican Gray Wolf Recovery Zone](#)

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Mónica Ortiz Uribe

A team of volunteers works with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to take vital signs on a captive female Mexican gray wolf at the Sevilleta National Wildlife Refuge in New Mexico.

Heavy gray clouds rumbled across the sky in Reserve, New Mexico. The village of 300 people sits in the heart of the Gila National Forest against a verdant backdrop of Ponderosa pine.

A yellow bus pulled up to a muddy driveway on a late August afternoon during the first week of school.

Emma Hardy, 11, and her brother bolted from the bus into the rain. They passed a crude wooden shelter with a tin roof and chicken wire windows. They call it the "kid cage."

"If we're waiting for the bus and there's a wolf or a creature that we think is gonna hurt us we get in there and lock it," Emma said.

Local high schoolers built these shelters in shop class. They showcase a culture of fear embedded in this rural western county.

Reserve is inside the boundaries of a federal wolf recovery area. Billboards in town display bloody images of dead calves that claim a wolf was to blame. Residents report wolf sightings weekly.

The Hardy family lives a mile and a half from the forest boundary right off the main road into town. Emma Hardy said she's spotted wolves near their home.

"I saw was a wolf coming and we had our chickens out by the porch and the wolf got the chicken and took off," she

said.

In the Southwest, the endangered Mexican gray wolf has not thrived as well as its cousins to the north. Part of the challenge is the wolves' proximity to humans.

To help boost the wolf population, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the agency managing the recovery program, wants to substantially expand the area where they can release new wolves into the wild.

Those who study wolves say the fear factor is overblown. There are no documented cases of wolves injuring or killing a human in the Southwest.

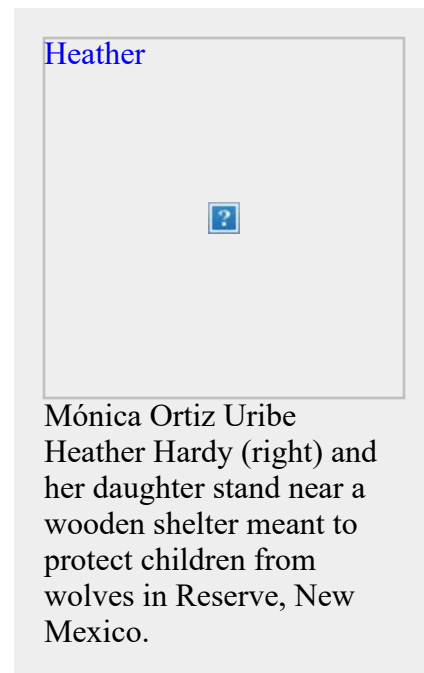
The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service began introducing Mexican gray wolves to a limited area of national forest straddling New Mexico and Arizona 16 years ago. The agency now wants to make the area on which wolves can roam freely 15 times larger.

"We're basically out of space," said Tracy Melbiess with the federal wolf recovery team.

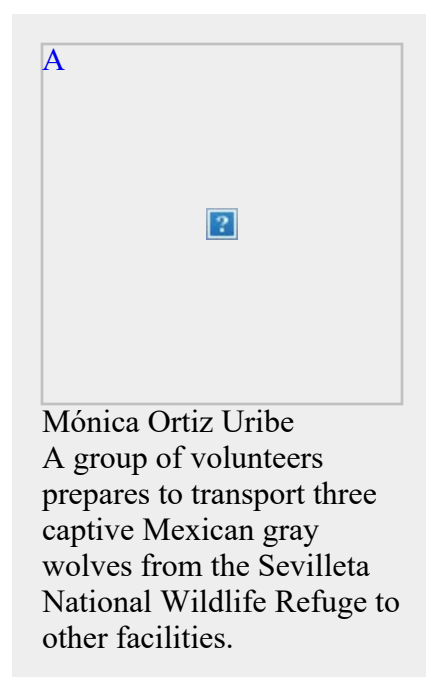
She explained the new proposal this month at public meetings in Arizona and New Mexico. Last year Fish and Wildlife counted 83 wild-born wolves.

"The genetics of the wild population are not as strong and robust as they need to be," Melbiess said.

Weak genetics are a result of inbreeding, which yields fewer pups. To help diversify the gene pool more wolves must be released from the hundreds currently in captivity. More wolves would require expanding the government imposed boundaries to avoid territorial conflicts.



Mónica Ortiz Uribe
Heather Hardy (right) and
her daughter stand near a
wooden shelter meant to
protect children from
wolves in Reserve, New
Mexico.



Mónica Ortiz Uribe
A group of volunteers
prepares to transport three
captive Mexican gray
wolves from the Sevilleta
National Wildlife Refuge to
other facilities.

Thousands of Mexican gray wolves once roamed from central Mexico into the American Southwest before humans nearly killed them off.

"What we really need to do here is simply work on the tolerance and acceptance of the wolf by humans," said Sherry Berrett, with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

That won't be easy. The number one killer of wolves is humans. Since the recovery program began 55 wolves have been killed illegally, whether by gunshot, trap or other means.

"The folks that have to live with the wolves, they are the ones that have to change their whole lives to accommodate the wolf," said Jess Carey, who investigates cattle deaths for the Catron County Sheriff's Department.

He disagrees with advocates who say wolves and humans must learn to co-exist.

"Their terminology of co-existence is this: The wolves are gonna kill your cows and you have to live with it. That's co-existence," Carey said.

Last year the Fish and Wildlife Service attributed 28 livestock deaths to wolves. Ranchers are eligible for compensation on a confirmed wolf kill. But they say that's a hard thing to prove. And they argue cattle stressed by wolves lose weight, which reduces their value. Hunters complain too, saying wolves eat up game.

But wolf defenders argue the struggling predator is key to a healthy ecosystem.

"The thing about wolves is they chase animals rather than ambush them as mountain lions do," said researcher Michael Robinson.

Robinson has studied the history of U.S. policy toward wolves for the past 13 years. He works with the Center for Biological Diversity, a nonprofit advocate for wildlife.

Robinson points to studies that show wolves prevent animals like elk from grazing too long at riverbanks. That allows more trees, like cottonwood and willows to grow. More trees attract more beavers.

"The beaver dams have created a habitat for fish," he said. "(The trees) also provide nesting grounds for migratory birds. So there's a cascading effect."

The new recovery plan aims to help the Mexican gray wolf get off the endangered species list. It also broadens rules that allow the legal killing of wolves that are identified as threat to humans and other animals. The combination is part an ongoing effort to please both sides of a decades-old debate.

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Billboards



Mónica Ortiz Uribe
Billboards warn outsiders
about the presence of
wolves outside Reserve,
New Mexico.