

2024 Interagency Field Team Work Plan for the Mexican Wolf Recovery Program

All work directly supports the main goals of the Mexican Wolf Recovery Program. Those goals are: 1) population monitoring, 2) conflict management, 3) population genetic management and monitoring and 4) increasing social tolerance for Mexican wolf recovery through responsive management, outreach, education, and peer-reviewed scientific literature.

Population monitoring activities occur throughout the year to establish a reliable and comparable year-end population count, as well as annual trends (e.g., distribution, natality, recruitment, mortality). Some examples of these activities include capturing and collaring wolves with GPS/Very High Frequency (VHF) radio collars, natal pup counts, assessing telemetry data from radio collared wolves, conducting annual end of year counts, surveying for new wolf activity in known range, and documenting wolf presence in expanded areas. Ongoing and future techniques for population monitoring are being evaluated in the Mexican Wolf Experimental Population Area (MWEPA) currently (e.g., marking fostered pups, camera grids, non-invasive genetic sampling) and additional collaboration with researchers will continue.

Conflict management (i.e., nuisance behavior, wolf/livestock conflict) occurs throughout the year. The IFT works on proactively preventing depredations by coordinating with livestock producers, ranch managers, range riders, and agency range conservationists to cooperatively develop solutions to reduce conflict. The IFT assesses wolf activity around livestock, manages diversionary food caches to potentially reduce conflict, hazes wolves near livestock, applies non-lethal tools (e.g., fladry, Fox lights) where practical, relocates cattle carcasses away from current or potential conflict areas, and removes wolves when necessary. In 2024 the IFT will continue to use agency range riders, which are technicians employed by an IFT agency that spend the majority of their work implementing conflict mitigation measures. These agency range riders have largely been used to focus proactive conflict management efforts in depredation hotspot areas as well as rapid response to wolf/livestock conflict. The IFT also manages non-livestock conflicts with wolves located near areas of human activity or residences or wolves that exhibit unacceptable behavior around humans. Effective conflict management furthers Mexican Wolf Recovery Program efforts to increase social tolerance in the MWEPA.

Genetic management, via pup-fostering, translocations, and removals (as necessary to avoid brother/sister pairings), will occur as outlined in the annual release and translocation plan to work towards increasing the genetic diversity of the population and meeting the objectives outlined in the 2022 Mexican Wolf Recovery Plan. In addition, translocations may occur throughout the year in response to management concerns or actions (e.g., wolves that establish outside of the Mexican Wolf Experimental Population Area).

Public presentations on Mexican wolf population recovery and management will occur as the IFT is able and with consideration to IFT workload and implementation of the four main goals of the Mexican Wolf Recovery Program.

In addition to the activities identified below, other field and office tasks routinely occur throughout the year, including:

- Data entry and quality checks.
- Staff training and development.
- Interagency database training and database maintenance.

- Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) revisions occur throughout the year. Emphasis will be on reviewing and revising those SOP's the Middle Management Team (MMT) and Executive Committee have determined are most critical for the IFT to review and revise first.
- Field work:
 - Conflict management as necessary (e.g., monitoring in depredation hotspots, diversionary food caching, hazing, carcass removal in areas with or potential for conflict).
 - Foothold trapping activities:
 - Preferred time-periods depend on the goal of trapping: routine collaring (Sept-Nov), uncollared packs (April-June), management (as necessary).
 - Wolf removals and translocations as necessary.
 - Scat sample collection for genetic population monitoring and to document survival of pup-fosters.
 - Survey unoccupied wolf habitat to document new wolf occupancy and abundance.
 - Ancillary field work as necessary (e.g., investigating sighting reports, wolf mortalities). This should be priority for non-lethal and only if no non-lethals are available.
- Public outreach, including compilation and dissemination of quarterly reports and updating the online wolf location map.
- Prepare and submit management-oriented manuscripts for peer-review publications.

In effort to reduce workload and cost in the face of an increasing wolf population and steady or declining agency budgets the following strategies will be implemented:

Collars:

- Continued implementation of the 2022 Mexican Wolf Recovery Plan's Implementation Strategy goal of having two collars per pack except for collaring of fostered wolves.
- The IFT will continue to use Global Positioning System (GPS) radio collars and will continue to explore other options regarding the marking of fostered wolves to document survival.

Data Reporting:

- The IFT database is robust and a focus on accurate and timely data entry will reduce time spent on all reports and data summaries needed throughout the year by IFT members at multiple levels.
- The IFT will continue to produce annual performance reports in 2024 using the IFT database. We will continue to assign Albuquerque personnel to lead efforts to compile the report. These efforts reduce annual workload considerably for all agency IFT members and increase timeliness of reports.

Food caching:

- Look for ways to reduce the cost (financially and personnel time) of supplemental and diversionary food caches.

Helicopter Operations:

- Annual helicopter count/capture operations will take place for 10-day (55 hours) at the end of January and rely on completed ground counts from November-January for annual count, as a continued cost saving measure that started in 2021.
 - In recent years, the IFT has found that ground counts have frequently been more successful than aerial counts at identifying the total number of animals in a pack. As such, when ground counts are available and considered reliable, the IFT will defer to these counts rather than focusing on counts

- during helicopter operations. Packs located in remote Wilderness/Primitive areas and packs in which ground counts were unsuccessful would still be prioritized for counting in aerial operations.
- Relying more on ground counting efforts will result in cost savings by reducing contracted helicopter hours.
 - More focused capture efforts also minimize risk to personnel by reducing the number of low-level aircraft flight hours.
 - We will also lower costs by reducing contracted hours for a veterinarian on the helicopter operation by relying more on agency veterinarians.
 - The IFT will explore use of smaller ground crews during helicopter operations to free up staff for other additional work that may occur, as needed. In some scenarios (such as wilderness or remote captures), the IFT will increase efficiency by using helicopter crews to process wolves in the field, rather than returning to a processing site.

Novel monitoring:

- Continue to look for novel or different techniques to monitor our wolf population.
- Continue to work with researchers on ways to reduce invasive management (capture and collaring) and/or increase non-invasive sampling techniques to reach population metrics (e.g., abundance, survival, fecundity)
- Continue to look for methods in 2024 to document fostered pup survival and prioritize trapping based on the results of camera trapping at supplemental feeding sites as well as collecting scat samples at den and rendezvous sites.
 - Some additional methods we will explore to document fostered pup survival are: alternative ear tagging methods, placing pit tags in legs, using expandable pup collars, and more methods may be considered throughout the year.

Staffing:

- The IFT will explore potential use of smaller teams for pup-fostering operations to free up other personnel resources to respond to depredations, haze, stock diversionary food caches, etc.
- Look for opportunities to utilize IFT range riders, interns, detailees, and volunteers during the busy pup-fostering, helicopter survey and capture, and fall foothold trapping periods to assist with conflict management workloads.
- Continue use of non-lethal Wildlife Services positions to conduct trapping for uncollared wolves when feasible, however, trapping is a tertiary priority for non-lethal Wildlife Services positions after conducting investigations and implementing less-than-lethal methods.
- Continue use of Wildlife Services wolf trapping specialist to improve the team's ability to document survival of fostered pups, trap in areas of uncollared wolves, and trap at the sites of depredations assigned to uncollared wolves quickly and effectively.
- Continue to improve and develop infrastructure for fleet and facilities. Work towards creating additional satellite workstations (Forest Service Work Centers or Ranger District Offices) with camper trailers to increase employee efficiency by potentially reducing response time and providing for more flexibility.

The FY2024 schedule for proposed IFT activities is as follows:

January

- Biologists complete data review and update their respective sections of the fourth 2023 quarterly report.
- IFT completes final adjustments 2024 Mexican Wolf Aviation Safety Operations Plan – first week (needs to be signed by FWS in November).
- Date TBD: Final planning meeting for 2024 Annual helicopter count and capture operations:
 - Finish landowner contacts regarding helicopter capture operations.
- Field work:
 - Finalize 2023 ground population count efforts from November through January and initiate helicopter operations.
 - Establish food caches to locate uncollared wolves for helicopter count and capture.
- 2024 Annual helicopter count and capture operation starts on 1/22.

February

- 2024 Annual helicopter count and capture operations completed by 2/4.
- IFT completes Quality Assessment and Control (QAQC) for 2023 data.
- IFT meeting: Helicopter after action review, finalize 2023 population count.
- U.S. Forest Service (USFS) coordination of spring ground activities (e.g., thinning, prescribed burns). USFS provides maps and timelines to initiate conversations around potential conflicts with wolf denning.
- Begin assessing captive and wild population pup-fostering opportunities and logistics.

March

- 2023 population count is announced to our partners and the public via a press release.
- Finalize automation of 2023 annual report and develop initial draft for IFT review.
- Continue USFS coordination of spring ground activities (e.g., thinning, prescribed burns). USFS provides maps and timelines to initiate conversations around potential conflicts with wolf denning.
- Attend USFS Annual Operating Instruction (AOI) meetings with permittees for grazing plans where and when invited. These also provide an opportunity for the IFT to give wolf updates and discuss potential conflict reduction strategies.
- Continue assessing captive and wild population pup-fostering opportunities and logistics.
- Once USFS updates AOIs, USFS to update pasture rotation in wolf working map.
- Adult capture (trapping) and collaring to address collaring goals.

April

- 4/1: Finalize the 2023 annual report IFT draft.
- 4/1: Biologists complete data review and update their respective sections of the quarterly report (First Quarter).
- Continue assessing captive and wild population pup-fostering opportunities and logistics. Pup-fostering operations begin this month and continue during the month as captive pups are available.
- Continue to attend USFS AOI meetings with permittees for grazing plans where and when invited; provide wolf updates and discuss potential conflict reduction strategies.
- Field work:
 - Den monitoring to estimate denning and whelp dates.
 - Genetic management through implementation of pup-fostering.
 - Natal pup counts begin.

- Supplemental feeding of pup-fostered packs begins.
- 4/30: 2023 Annual Report final draft completed and submitted to the MMT for review and comments.
- Coordinate with USFS Districts to share general den locations and mitigate potential land use/management impacts.

May

- Continue to attend USFS AOI meetings with permittees for grazing plans where and when invited; provide wolf updates and discuss potential conflict reduction strategies.
- Continue assessing captive and wild population pup-fostering opportunities and logistics. Pup-fostering operations continue as captive pups are available and in synchrony with wild den pup production.
- Continue coordination with USFS Districts to share general den locations and mitigate potential land use/management impacts.
- Field work:
 - Genetic management through implementation of pup-fostering.
 - Routine denning related field work (e.g., pup counts, reproduction).
 - Natal pup counts continue and ear tagging of fostered pups can begin.
 - Supplemental feeding of pup fostered packs continues.
 - Adult capture (trapping) and collaring to achieve collaring goals.

June

- Field work:
 - Non-natal pup counts continue as necessary and ear tagging of fostered pups continue.
 - Routine denning related field work (e.g., pup counts, status of recruitment, and pup survival).
 - Supplemental feeding of pup fostered packs continues.
 - Adult capture (trapping) and collaring to achieve collaring goals.
 - Rendezvous site documentation.
 - Collect scat at rendezvous and den sites of pup-fostered packs.

July

- 7/1: Biologists complete data review and update their respective sections of the quarterly report (Second Quarter).
- IFT Database Refresher and Updates Training.
- Chemical Immobilization Training
- Field work:
 - Routine denning related field work (e.g., pup counts, status of recruitment, and pup survival).
 - Supplemental feeding of pup fostered packs continues.
 - Rendezvous site documentation.
 - Collect scat at rendezvous and den sites of pup-fostered packs. Opportunistic collection of scat will continue throughout the entire year.

August

- IFT leads begin to draft the 2025 Initial Release and Translocation Plan and 2025 Annual Work Plan.

- IFT sets trapping priorities and prepares for trapping season.
- Field work:
 - Routine field work (e.g., pup counts, status of recruitment, and pup survival).
 - Supplemental feeding of pup fostered packs continues if necessary.
 - Rendezvous site documentation.
 - Collect scat at rendezvous and den sites of pup-fostered packs.
 - Adult capture (trapping) and collaring to address collaring goals.

September

- Finalize 2025 Initial Release and Translocation Plan Draft and Finalize 2025 Annual Work Plan and submit to the MMT for discussion and comment.
- Field work:
 - Foothold trapping to collar adults and pups and document/collar fostered pups.
 - Routine field work (e.g., pup counts, status of recruitment, and pup survival).
 - Rendezvous site documentation.
 - Supplemental feeding of pup-fostered packs continues.
- IFT leads begin drafting the 2025 Mexican Wolf Aviation Safety Operations Plan.
- Outreach begins to disseminate information to hunters in wolf occupied areas of the MWEPA in effort to reduce wolf mortalities.

October

- 10/1: Biologists complete data review and update their respective sections of the quarterly report (Third Quarter).
- Field work:
 - Foothold trapping to collar adults and pups and document/collar fostered pups.
 - Rendezvous site documentation.
 - Supplemental feeding of pup-fostered packs continues.
- IFT begins preparing the 2025 Mexican Wolf Aviation Safety Operations Plan and begins operational planning to identify and delegate roles, responsibilities, and duties.

November

- 2025 Annual helicopter count and capture operations planning meeting at the beginning of the month
- Field work:
 - 11/1: End-of-year population count begins.
 - Uncollared sign search.
 - Ground counts of packs and single wolves.
 - Foothold trapping to collar adults and pups and document pup-foster survival continues as temperatures allow.
- Mid-November: IFT completes the 2025 Mexican Wolf Aviation Safety Operations Plan and is sent in for review and signature by Regional and National Aviation Managers.

December

- Annual helicopter count and capture operations planning continues.

- Private landowner contacts regarding 2025 Annual helicopter count and capture operations begin.
- Field work
 - End-of-year population counts continue:
 - Uncollared sign search
 - Ground counts of packs and single wolves.
 - Establish food caches to locate uncollared wolves for January/February helicopter count and capture.