



Harassing Mexican Wolves *Q's and A's*

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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service would like to allow people living in Mexican gray wolf country to harass wolves by hitting them with paintballs when wolves are in the vicinity of livestock and human residences. Paintballs deliver a stinging blow that will scare the wolf away and reinforce their natural fear of humans. The permitted use of paintballs will give citizens who encounter wolves a legal means to harass problem wolves. The sting of a paintball will encourage the wolves to stay away from places where there are humans.

Our plan is to work with our partners, Arizona Game and Fish Department and New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, to issue paintguns and paintballs to people who have a documented history of interaction with problem wolves.

Under the experimental rule that oversees the Mexican wolf reintroduction and recovery program, nuisance wolves can be trapped and transplanted to new areas or brought back into captivity. This disrupts wolf pack behavior. Our goal is to keep wolves wild by diminishing interactions with humans, and decreasing the removal of wolves from the wild.

The following questions and answers explain how this plan will work:

Q. Why is a 'harassment' program needed?

A. Wolves are highly intelligent and curious by nature. This innate curiosity is how wolves learn and is what allows them to successfully and quickly adapt to new situations and changing environments. Unfortunately, this same curiosity and other "hard-wired" behaviors is what often bring them into conflict with humans. This can be especially true for naïve, captive-reared wolves, released into a completely unfamiliar environment, and suddenly faced with the challenge of having to mark out, learn, and defend a large enough area with enough resources to ensure the survival of the individual/pack, all the while avoiding conflicts with other established neighboring packs. People who live and work full-time in the more remote district of the wolf recovery area are more apt to encounter wolves. Their options for harassing wolves are limited now to shouting and making other loud noises; discharging firearms and throwing objects in proximity to but not in the direction of wolves. The wolf will learn there are no real negative consequences associated with these forms of harassment.

Q. When will the program begin? Who will issue the permit?

A. We, USFWS, will modify our permits to allow the Arizona Game and Fish Department and the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish to harass wolves using paint balls. The states can then authorize individuals to act as their agents in harassing wolves. The program will become operational when the three agencies have a tracking and monitoring plan and have a training program for those who will be issued paintballs.

Q. Doesn't the Endangered Species Act prohibit harassing threatened and endangered species?

A. The Endangered Species Act prohibits harassments as part of the definition for the term "take." It is illegal for people to "take" an endangered or threatened species, unless they possess a permit. "Take" means to harass, harm, pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture or collect, or to attempt to engage in any such conduct. Section 17.84 (1) (ix) provides that under the Mexican Wolf rule, personnel authorized by the Service may take any Mexican wolf in the nonessential experimental population in a manner consistent with a USFWS approved management plan. The proposed harassment program fits under this provision, as the authorized agents designated by our partner States, would be acting on behalf of the USFWS.

Q. Are there any studies that suggest paintballs effectively aversely condition wolves to livestock, domestic residences, etc.?

A. The literature harassing wolves and other large predators is very limited and inconclusive. This proposal is for a one-year, experimental program which will provide data about the effectiveness of such measures.

Q. What happens when a wolf is hit with paint balls?

A. Little formal research has been conducted on the effects of paint balls on wolves. Biologists working on the Mexican wolf reintroduction effort use paint balls to aversely condition wolves that exhibit interest in humans in the holding pens. Project field team members have used paint balls to aversively condition wolves that approach houses within the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area. It has been the experience of program biologists that wolves dislike being struck by paint balls, but no long-term negative impacts have been observed. It is important to note that the proposed program would be implemented for one year as an experimental program, with monitoring of the wolves. If negative effects on the wolves are observed, the program would be modified or discontinued. The Northern Rockies gray wolf reintroduction program has used rubber bullets for several years with no negative impacts to individual wolves or the overall wolf population observed.

Q. What happens if a paintball kills a wolf?

A. Given past experience with aversive conditioning of captive wolves and marking of wildlife with paint balls, not to mention extensive recreational use of paint balls in mock combat games, no mortality is anticipated. In the extremely unlikely case of a severe injury or mortality to a wolf caused by a paint ball, the authorized agent would be required to report the incident within 24 hours. If the subsequent investigation confirmed that the authorized agent was using approved paint ball munitions and equipment in the permitted manner, no further action would be taken.

Q. How will this program improve the Mexican wolf recovery program?

A. We believe that through aversive conditioning of wolves that exhibit threatening behavior, we may alter wolf behavior by reinforcing their natural fear of humans. Additionally, experience in the Northern Rocky Mountain wolf reintroduction program suggests that providing residents of the reintroduction area a legal means of harassing wolves may reduce landowner resistance to wolf reintroduction. The proposal is a modest effort to examine alternative methods of increasing the overall effectiveness of the wolf reintroduction effort. It could also benefit Mexican wolf recovery to the extent that any wolves which are effectively aversively conditioned will be less likely to become problem wolves requiring permanent removal from the wild population.

Q. Might paint make the wolves more visible and thus more vulnerable to illegal shooting?

A. We don't expect wolves would be more visible due to the small size of the mark left by a paint ball and our intent to use paint colors having the least contrast to the wolves' coats. Also, the wolves' long coats break up the mark. Biologists with experience in using paint balls on animals report that after one week the paint is extremely difficult to detect, having worn or washed off. We want to allow citizens to effectively harass wolves who are in the vicinity of livestock and human residences. If the rate of illegal shootings of wolves that have been hit by paintballs is higher than that of unpainted wolves, the experimental program will be revised or discontinued.

Q. What color paint will be used?

A. A neutral or earth tone color would be selected to minimize the likelihood of the paint having any adverse visual effect on the wolf.

Q. Who will be responsible for providing the necessary equipment to permittees?

A. The equipment would be purchased by us (USFWS) with federal funds and will be supplied to the states' authorized agents through the state game and fish department having jurisdiction.

Q. What are the reporting requirements?

A. The program would be authorized for a year. Each state agency will submit a report at the end of the year. While the final details have not been fully codified, our proposal is that authorized agents would be required to report the details of each harassment to the State agencies within 7 days of an occurrence.

Q. Will there be a monitoring/tracking program to study the effects?

A. We will continue to track radio collared wolves, particularly those in proximity to cattle or buildings and homes. As this proposed program is experimental, we will make every effort to determine what effect it has had on individual wolves and the Nonessential Experimental Population of Mexican wolves as a whole.

Q. Will this harassment program have an impact on the "three strikes and the wolf is out" tenet?

A. Our Standard Operating Procedure for wolves who have three depredation (killed livestock) incidents will not be affected. Our hope is that by aversively conditioning wolves, we will disrupt potential nuisance behavior which could then decrease the overall number of wolves subject to permanent removal orders.