

Statement of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service before the New Mexico State Game Commission regarding the Appeal of Permit Denials for the Release of Mexican Wolves in New Mexico

Good morning, Chairman Kienzle, Commissioners, distinguished guests and citizens. My name is Joy Nicholopoulos. I am the Deputy Regional Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Thank you for the opportunity to speak before the Commission today.

Although the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish recently denied the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's 2015 requests for permits pertaining to releases of Mexican wolves, we believe we can have a discussion regarding the requests, the permits, and the reasoning behind the planned activities, and perhaps have an outcome acceptable to all.

Our desire is to work with the state as we move forward with wolf recovery. Our efforts, and those of our partners—including the State of New Mexico, contribute toward the recovery of the Mexican wolf, which when the species is recovered, will eventually lead to state management of the Mexican wolf.

I'd like to provide some brief background information. Our captive breeding program was started with only seven Mexican wolves, and is the source for the reestablishment of the wild population after the near extinction of the Mexican

wolf in the 1980s. Through releases of Mexican wolves from captivity, we have been successful in establishing a fully wild population of at least 110 Mexican wolves in Arizona and New Mexico. This population has exhibited strong growth over the last four years, and additional releases from the more genetically diverse captive population are required to improve the genetic health of the wild population.

In the past, releases have typically included adult wolves and/or packs of wolves. More recently, and into the future, we are also pursuing cross-fostering of wolf pups into the wild. Cross-fostering involves moving less than 2-week old pups—very young pups—from their captive, biological parents to dens of wild wolves so that the pups are raised in the wild by wild parents.

Improving the genetic health of the current wild population is crucial to our overall recovery efforts. Releasing new wolves to improve population genetics is more effective when the population is still small, thus it is imperative that we – the US Fish and Wildlife Service and the State of New Mexico – work swiftly to resolve the issues pertaining to State permits for the release of Mexican wolves. Delaying these releases will serve to potentially increase the total number of wolves that need to be released into the wild to ensure that this population can meaningfully contribute to recovery.

The Sevilleta Wolf Management Facility currently contains wolves awaiting release. If releases are curtailed, then pen space at Sevilleta is not available for

needed removals of wolves from the wild, including removal of wolves from the wild in the US for transfer to, and release in, Mexico. This could severely limit our response to problem wolves.

The Service has diligently met all of the requirements of the New Mexico State Game Commission rules, and we have adequate guiding documents necessary to be awarded permits from the State. A revised recovery plan is not required—let me repeat that—a revised recovery plan is not required to continue Mexican wolf recovery efforts in any state, including New Mexico.

The New Mexico Administrative Code requires that those applying for permits to release imported animals “demonstrate that the intended release is provided for in state or federal resource or species management plans or strategies.” In our April 1, 2015, letter to New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, we confirmed that the proposed releases were provided for in the Experimental Population (or 10-J) Rule for the Mexican Wolf, which establishes a population objective for Mexican wolves, and contains provisions for their release and management.

The New Mexico Department of Game and Fish also indicated that in the absence of a recovery plan, it cannot determine that the release request will not conflict with state conservation management efforts. In the Experimental Population (or 10-J) Rule, we incorporated language developed in coordination with the state game agencies in Arizona and New Mexico that provides for the removal of Mexican wolves if they are having an unacceptable impact on native ungulate

populations. We will work closely with the state game agencies in implementing this provision.

Although recovery planning efforts are unrelated to this permit issue, as an update, we are actively moving forward with a revision to the current Mexican Wolf Recovery Plan. On August 4, 2015, the Service sent invitations to the Game and Fish Departments in New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado and Utah. We invited the states to participate in the revision of the recovery plan for Mexican wolves. The Service intends to finalize the revised recovery plan by the end of 2017. That means we will have a revised recovery plan by the end of 2017.

We aim to increase the wild wolf population and improve population genetics, and in collaboration with the state, we plan to continue our path forward. There is some urgency to resolve this issue quickly as we are presently evaluating potential releases for the remainder of 2015 and initial releases and cross-foster events for 2016. In the meantime, we are exploring alternatives to address the State's current resistance to wolf releases to fulfill our mandate to recover this endangered species.

We acknowledge the State's regulatory permitting requirements, and we have ensured that our applications meet those requirements. Although not required by State or Federal regulation, the Service is moving forward with revising our Mexican wolf recovery plan to ensure our future strategy incorporates lessons learned and results of recovery efforts to date.

We assert that we have done everything necessary to secure permits and move forward with Mexican wolf recovery in New Mexico. We will continue to meet permit application requirements in the future as well. We therefore respectfully request that the Commission reverse the decision to deny the permits and that the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish issue the requested permits to the Service so that we can move forward with Mexican Wolf recovery in the state of New Mexico.

Thank you for allowing me to make this statement for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in support of our permit requests.

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