United States Department of the Interior

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

Post Office Box 1306
Albuquerque, New Mexico 87103

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Memorandum

To: Mexican Wolf Recovery Coordinator, Southwest Region

Through: Assistant Regional Director, Ecological Services, Southwest Region

From: Regional Director, Southwest Region

Subject: Decision Memo; Mexican Wolves AM1051 and AF1126 (Coronado Pack)

In preparation for a release, on April 26, 2013, we transferred a pair of Mexican wolves (AM1051 and AF1126) from the Sevilleta Wolf Management Facility (SWMF) to an acclimation pen near the Corduroy Creek release site on the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest in the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area in Arizona. The objective of this release was to replace wolves that have been removed from the population due to illegal mortality and to increase the genetic diversity of the wild population. For reasons given below, I have decided that this pair, AM1051 and AF1126, will not be released to the wild at this time.

The 15-year history of the Mexican wolf reintroduction project has shown that naïve wolves are most successful when released as pairs with pups. At a young age, pups are less mobile and after release can help anchor the pack to the intended release site. Additional efforts during this time by the Interagency Field Team (IFT) can also increase success, such as establishing a food cache as the naïve wolves learn to hunt and adjust to the wild. Release sites are selected in unoccupied wolf territories where prey is available and the potential for conflict with humans and livestock is reduced.

AM1051 and AF1126 were moved from other captive breeding institutions to the SWMF in October, 2012. In December 2012, based on recommendations from the IFT, we decided to release AM1051 and AF1126 near the Corduroy Creek release site. In order to increase their chance of success, AM1051 and AF1126 were allowed to breed at the SWMF. A breeding tie was observed, and a pregnancy test conducted on April 10, 2013, confirmed that AF1126 was pregnant.

A primary reason the Corduroy Creek site was selected as the proposed release site is because the territory had recently become unoccupied by any packs of wolves. The area is in the Rim pack's traditional home range. However, in January 2013, we removed the Rim pack alpha female to harvest valuable genetic material. In addition, the Rim pack had not successfully raised pups in several years; therefore, the only remaining member of the Rim pack was the single alpha male, M1107.

The transfer of AM1051 and AF1126 to the acclimation pen at the Corduroy Creek release site was accomplished prior to the female whelping pups. The pair is being held in the acclimation pen, and volunteers, mostly from facilities within the captive breeding program, are monitoring the wolves. The female is thought to have whelped between May 4th and 5th, but behavior following whelping indicated the pups did not survive. On May 22nd the IFT confirmed that none of the pups survived.

Beginning on May 5th and during the following weeks, the Rim AM1107 has been documented near and at the acclimation pen. Interactions through the chain-link with AM1051 and AF1126 are aggressive in nature. These observations have also indicated that AM1107 is not alone and is traveling with an uncollared wolf. On June 3, 2013, the IFT captured this uncollared wolf and verified it is a female. The IFT now believes AM1107 has paired with a new female and is attempting to defend the Rim pack's traditional home range.

Based on this new information, the IFT evaluated potential options for AM1051 and AF1126, including conducting the release as scheduled, relocating the pair to the Fish Bench release site five miles to the north (providing some separation with the Rim pair, although the Fish Bench site is still within the northern extent of the traditional home range and releasing there may not eliminate the potential for aggressive interactions), and placing AM1051 and AF1126 back into captivity and evaluating release options for the pair in the future. On June 6, 2013, AM1107 was documented at the Fish Bench site.

While the goal of releasing AM1051 and AF1126, to offset illegal mortality and increase the genetic diversity of the wild population, may still be met by conducting the release as scheduled or at the alternate site, the loss of the pair's pups, plus the indication that the territory is again occupied by the Rim pack, significantly reduces the new pair's chances for success. If released, it is likely the Rim pack will defend their territory. Without pups, it is unknown whether AM1051 and AF1126 will stay together, and it is unlikely they will stay localized in the area where the IFT can assist in their transition to the wild. Therefore, I have decided to transfer AM1051 and AF1126 from the acclimation pen at the Corduroy Creek release site back to SWMF, and we will evaluate options for a successful release in the future.

I note that the limited opportunity for alternate release sites for this pair of wolves emphasizes the need for the recent proposed revisions to the experimental nonessential population. Introduction of new genes into the wild population is critical to the growth, genetic health and success of the Mexican Wolf, and we remain committed to improving this population to ensure its contributions to recovery.