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FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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Memorandum

To: Mexican Wolf Recovery Coordinator, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, New Mexico Ecological Services Field Office, Albuquerque, NM

Through: Assistant Regional Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Ecological Services, Albuquerque, NM *Michelle Shaughnessy*

From: Regional Director, Region 2, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Albuquerque, NM *Greg D. Puffle*

Subject: Depredation Decision; Mexican Wolves AM1158/AF1188 (Fox Mountain Pack)

Under the final 10(j) rule (50 CFR Part 17) of January 12, 1998 (Final Rule), the Interagency Management Plan of March 1998, and the Final Environmental Impact Statement of November 1996, five confirmed livestock depredation incidents within one year by Mexican wolf male AM1158 and female AF1188 trigger a decision on the appropriate continued management of the Fox Mountain pack, including whether these wolves should remain in the wild or be removed from the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area (BRWA).

The USDA Wildlife Services investigated a depredation incident on June 16, 2011, of an injured calf within the Fox Mountain pack's territory, approximately 0.05 mile from the pack's 2011 den site. The USDA Wildlife Services confirmed the injuries to be wolf caused, and to have occurred on June 15, 2011. The calf died as a result of its injuries. On June 13, 2011 telemetry signals from M1158 and F1188 were located 4.2 miles from the site of the incident. The Interagency Field Team (IFT) determined the Fox Mountain pack was responsible for this depredation.

The USDA Wildlife Services investigated a depredation incident on July 6, 2011, of a dead calf found approximately 1.75 miles from the pack's rendezvous area. The USDA Wildlife Services confirmed the injuries to be wolf caused. On July 5, 2011, F1188 and M1158 were located 3.0 miles from the site of the incident. The IFT determined the Fox Mountain pack was responsible for this depredation.

The USDA Wildlife Services investigated a depredation incident of a cow on March 27, 2012, on State land outside the BRWRA boundary. The USDA Wildlife Services confirmed the injuries to be wolf caused. Following the depredation the Interagency Field Team (IFT) worked to determine if the depredation was caused by uncollared wolves or wolves associated with the Fox Mountain pack. Based on radio telemetry, the IFT determined the Fox Mountain pack was responsible for this depredation.

The USDA Wildlife Services investigated a depredation incident of a calf on April 26, 2012, on private land outside the BRWRA boundary. The USDA Wildlife Services confirmed the injuries to be wolf caused. Radio telemetry evidence showing the Fox Mountain pack near the depredation led to the IFT determination that the Fox Mountain pack was responsible for this depredation. The IFT then began intensive monitoring and hazing of the Fox Mountain pack in order to move them away from livestock, and set up a diversionary food cache to reduce the potential for future depredations. The IFT has worked with affected permittees to sponsor two Range Riders to monitor the livestock in the Fox Mountain pack territory both within and outside the BRWRA boundary. Two Range Riders are currently monitoring wolves and livestock in the Fox Mountain pack territory. The IFT is also working with the affected livestock producer to provide supplemental food for livestock feeding on private property.

The USDA Wildlife Services investigated a depredation incident of a cow on May 1, 2012, on Bureau of Land Management property near Cow Springs outside the boundaries of the BRWRA. The death of the cow appeared to have occurred at least 4 weeks prior to the time of the investigation, which puts the date of the depredation around April 2, 2012. The USDA Wildlife Services confirmed the injuries to be wolf caused. Based on radio telemetry, the IFT determined the Fox Mountain pack was responsible for this depredation.

The Final Rule section 17.84(k)(10) states: “if Mexican wolves of the experimental population occur on public lands outside the designated wolf recovery area(s), but within the Mexican Wolf Experimental Population Area, the Service or an authorized agency will attempt to capture any radio-collared lone wolf and any lone wolf or member of an established pack causing livestock “depredations.”

I extend my sincere thanks to all those involved in doing the analysis and in implementing field efforts to protect livestock and conserve wolves. I make my decision in full consideration of the following:

1. While the minimum population increased from 42 to 58 between 2009 and 2011, the longer term population trend has remained relatively “flat,” oscillating between 40 and 60 wolves between 2002 and 2011 largely due to natural and unlawful mortalities in combination with legal removal actions. While the more recent population trend is encouraging, I remain concerned about the overall population goal over the longer term.

2. The current Fox Mountain pack was formed in 2011 by wild born female wolf 1188 and wild born male wolf 1158. In 2011, the Fox Mountain pack exhibited denning behavior, although the IFT was unable to confirm pup production or survival. However, there is an uncollared adult wolf observed with the pack in trail camera photos (May 2012), which suggests that at least one pup may have been recruited last year. Currently, the IFT has gathered telemetry and visual evidence confirming the Fox Mountain pack has denned in the northern portion of their territory near the Apache National Forest boundary. This pack is important to achieving population goals. Disruption of pack dynamics, particularly as pups are reared, could jeopardize pup survival.

3. In the early phases of recovery (less than five packs), the Interagency Management Plan considers that wolves may not necessarily be determined to be problem wolves if depredations occur on public lands and in areas, or at times, that are critically important to wolves. Areas or habitat components of critical importance to wolves include areas within one mile of known or highly suspected wolf dens from March 1 to June 30 or rendezvous sites from June 1 to September 30. This management flexibility applied to the two Fox Mountain pack depredations which occurred in the summer of 2011 (the 2010 population count documented two breeding pairs, putting the population at less than five packs or breeding pairs). One confirmed depredation investigated on June 17, 2011, occurred within one mile of an active den site and between March 1 and June 30, a time and location considered to be of critical importance to denning wolves. One confirmed depredation on July 6, 2011 occurred between June 1 and September 30, a time considered to be of critical importance to wolves during rendezvous season, and within one mile of the rendezvous area. The Interagency Management Plan specifies that under such conditions, control of wolves will only occur if all other options for resolution of the conflict have been exhausted. However, as of December 2011, we now have seven operational breeding pairs (six of which meet the strict definition of a breeding pair in the Final Rule), and thus this flexibility does not apply to the latter three depredations.

4. The Interagency Management Plan states “attempts should be made to keep alpha females, females with young, or females showing signs of lactation in the population, when feasible, in order to maintain the integrity of the breeding segment of the population. Also, during the later stages of recovery (five or more packs), when other adults are removed from the population, females with young (< September 1) may be released or not controlled. Decisions to relocate or remove a wolf or wolves from the wild population will be based on criteria such as the number of established packs in the recovery area, the sex, age, and reproductive status of the animal(s), and other circumstances relevant to the specific situation.” In order to maintain the integrity of the breeding segment of the population in this specific instance, we have considered both the background and the genetic value of both AF1188 and AM1158. AM1158 was born and raised in the Fox Mountain pack territory and was not implicated in any livestock depredations prior to AF1188 joining the Fox Mountain pack in 2011. AM1158 has a greater genetic value than AF1188 when considering the long-term breeding integrity of the Blue Range Wolf population. These two factors will be considered if removal of an alpha wolf is considered appropriate after the pups are no longer dependent on the alpha female.

5. The Interagency Management Plan considers the severity of the depredations and the number of times the wolf (or wolves) have committed depredations. M1158 was born in the wild in 2008, and F1188 was born in the wild in 2009. Prior to their natural formation in 2011 as the Fox Mountain pack, neither wolf was documented in any depredation incidents. The Fox Mountain pack has demonstrated significant periods of time with no livestock depredations. For instance the March 26, 2012 depredation is 8.5 months removed from the previous depredation. Therefore, this pack has demonstrated significant periods of time with no livestock depredations.

6. It is important to retain wild-born wolves in the 10(j) wolf population. Due to the likelihood that the Fox Mountain pack is already denning, allowing for the natural rearing of wild born pups from the Fox Mountain pack into adulthood is beneficial to overall population survival. If denning does not occur and no pups are produced, both the background and the genetic value of both AF1188 and AM1158 will be considered as explained above in #4.

7. The Final Rule section 17.84(k)(10) states: "The agencies will not routinely capture and return pack members that make occasional forays onto public land outside the designated wolf recovery area(s) and uncollared lone wolves on public land. However, the Service will capture and return to a recovery area or to captivity packs from the nonessential experimental population that establish territories on public land wholly outside the designated wolf recovery area(s)." While the Fox Mountain pack has been located recently on public lands outside the BRWRA boundary during April 2012, we believe these locations constitute "occasional forays" outside the BRWRA boundary rather than maintaining a territory that is wholly outside the BRWRA boundary. Since the formation of the current Fox Mountain pack in January 2011, Mexican wolves AF1188 and AM1158 have been located within the BRWRA 95% of the time.

Therefore, in consideration of the current activities of the IFT in response to the depredations outside the BRWRA, and these seven points and utilizing the flexibilities authorized in the Interagency Management Plan, my decision is the Fox Mountain pack, including adults and pups, shall remain in the wild at this time. The IFT will maintain a diversionary food cache in order to reduce the potential of future livestock depredations during wolf denning and rendezvous season. Range Riders will be working in the Fox Mountain territory to reduce the future potential for livestock depredations. The IFT will continue to intensively monitor the Fox Mountain pack as the denning season progresses. As we go forward we will reevaluate their status, taking into consideration any additional depredations that may occur and the presence and/or survival of pups.

If future depredations occur, a wolf from this pack may be considered for removal. An uncollared yearling could be considered for removal immediately following any future depredations, while removal of either AM1158 or AF1188 would only be considered after the pups are no longer dependent on the alpha female for milk (when the pups are six to eight weeks of age). In addition, Agency personnel are authorized to implement a full spectrum of integrated and innovative methods to deter depredation behavior, including ground hazing on foot or by horseback and aerial hazing, if deemed appropriate by IFT personnel. We remain committed to assisting ranchers and permittees with depredation problems caused by wolves.

I wish to thank the Mexican Wolf Interdiction Fund and the associated Stakeholder Council for their commitments toward financial compensation to the livestock producer for past, current, and any future depredation losses. I encourage the IFT to focus on addressing field efforts and needs associated with the Fox Mountain Pack's continued monitoring, with frequent reports conveyed to me through U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service contacts and normal agency channels.