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Service Completes Evaluation of Proposed Changes to Mexican Wolf Experimental Population in Arizona and New Mexico - *Final Environmental Impact Statement Outlines Steps to Increase Range and Genetic Diversity, Mitigate Impacts to Ranchers and Native Ungulates* -

After reviewing extensive public comments, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has completed its evaluation of proposed changes to its Mexican wolf reintroduction program in Arizona and New Mexico that will allow greater flexibility to conserve one of the nation's rarest mammals and greater responsiveness to the needs of local communities in cases of problem wolf behavior.

In releasing its final [Environmental Impact Statement](#) (fEIS) on new provisions proposed under the Endangered Species Act in 2013 and revised last summer, the Service sets the stage for a final decision on the changes in the program in January 2015.

"We have received and analyzed more than 40,000 comments on the proposed changes as part of developing the Environmental Impact Statement, as well as consulted with state agencies, tribes, and other stakeholders," said Benjamin Tuggle, the Service's Southwest Regional Director. "We believe the preferred alternative strikes the best balance in terms of what is needed to re-establish a genetically diverse wolf population while supporting the interests of other stakeholders on a working landscape."

In the final EIS, the Service evaluates four alternatives for proposed revisions to the regulations for the nonessential experimental population of the Mexican wolf including a preferred alternative that would include:

- expanding the areas within which Mexican wolves can be released, translocated, disperse and occupy. In Arizona, management activities would be methodically phased west of Highway 87 over a period of up to 12 years,
- extending the Mexican Wolf Experimental Population Area's (MWEPA) southern boundary from I-40 to the U.S.-Mexico border in Arizona and New Mexico to provide for a larger area where management flexibility applies,

- clarifying definitions in the rule, including provisions for take of Mexican wolves when attacking livestock and non-feral dogs, or as needed to manage wild ungulate populations (particularly elk and deer), and
- providing for a population objective of 300-325 Mexican wolves in the MWEPA.

The fEIS considers effects on land use, biological resources (including wild ungulate prey species), economic activities (including ranching, hunting and tourism), human health and safety, and environmental justice. A final decision to select an alternative for implementation is due in January 2015.

Since 1998, the Service and cooperating state, federal and tribal agencies have reintroduced and managed Mexican wolves under a rule designating the U.S. population as “Experimental.” This designation provides for increased management flexibility for populations that are reintroduced into a designated experimental area within their historical range.

The 1998 rule was established to determine whether a reintroduced population of at least 100 wolves could be established in the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area, but it limited initial wolf releases to 16 percent of the Blue Range in Arizona. Those regulations constrain managers’ ability to achieve the necessary population growth, distribution and recruitment that would improve genetic variation within the experimental population and contribute to a self-sustaining population of Mexican wolves on the landscape—a population that could meaningfully contribute to the animal’s recovery.

“Over the last 16 years, we have learned much about managing a wild population of Mexican wolves, and it is clear that the current rule does not provide the clarity or the flexibility needed to effectively manage the experimental population in a working landscape,” said Sherry Barrett, Mexican Wolf Recovery Coordinator. “We need to increase our management flexibility in a manner that is responsive to the diverse needs of local communities and the existing prey base.”

The proposed rule revisions have been informed through input from 28 cooperating agencies and 11 tribes and pueblos and more than 40,000 public comments. A draft Record of Decision (ROD) for the preferred alternative is [posted](#). The final rule is due under court settlement by January 12, 2015.

Written comments on the final environmental impact statement will be considered in a final ROD and can be submitted by one of the following methods:

(1) *Electronically*: Go to the Federal eRulemaking Portal: <http://www.regulations.gov>. Search for FWS–R2–ES–2013–0056, which is the docket number for this rulemaking. You may submit a comment by clicking on “Comment Now!” Please ensure that you have found the correct rulemaking before submitting your comment.

(2) *By hard copy*: Public Comments Processing, Attn: FWS–R2–ES–2013–0056; Division of Policy and Directives Management; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Headquarters, MS: BPHC, 5275 Leesburg Pike, Falls Church, VA 22041-3803.

Comments are due by Dec. 27, 2014.

To learn more about the Mexican wolf recovery program, proposed rule revision, FEIS, and dRod, visit <http://www.fws.gov/southwest/es/mexicanwolf/>.

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