

After at least seven livestock animals were killed by a wolf or wolves in central New Mexico over the last year, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service killed an endangered Mexican gray wolf last week.

The agency is allowed to intentionally kill the endangered wolves within the experimental population area, which straddles Arizona and New Mexico. Wildlife advocates are critical of the decision, calling it infuriating and counterproductive, while one Catron County rancher thinks it was the right decision made too late.

The species was listed as endangered in 1976, after being almost entirely eliminated from the wild because of conflicts with livestock. Fish and Wildlife began releasing captive wolves into the experimental population area in 1998, part of a long-term recovery effort. The Mexican gray wolf population increased 11% last year, according to an annual wolf count from the Arizona and New Mexico departments of Game and Fish.

Wolves from the Hail Canyon pack near Reserve were connected to seven confirmed and two probable livestock kills over the last year, prompting the decision to kill a 5-year-old male wolf from the pack.

Six of the livestock kills were in the last month, according to a Fish and Wildlife memo. One horse was killed, but the rest of the animals were cows. The pack had five wolves, including two adults. The breeding female in the pack is expected to soon have a new litter of pups.

Fish and Wildlife does not expect the male wolf's removal to "impact the ability of the Hail Canyon pack to raise pups because there are other yearlings in the pack to assist in raising pups," the memo reads, and the wolf's genes are still represented in the wild through offspring and siblings.

"This is such a critical time of year for a wolf family — to kill the breeding male of a pack is a huge setback," Chris Smith, wildlife program director at WildEarth Guardians, said in a statement.

Before killing the wolf, the agency worked with a rancher in the area to deter cattle depredation by establishing diversionary food caches and hazing the wolves, according to the memo. They also trapped three Mexican wolves on private land in the area and radio collared them for continued monitoring.

"These removals are done to support the public lands livestock grazing industry, where a handful of ranchers get a sweetheart deal and heavy subsidies to degrade our national forests for private profit — including the destruction of keystone species who are vital to a healthy ecosystem," Greta Anderson, deputy director of Western Watersheds Project, said in a statement.

Livestock kills declined in 2024 to 99, 77 of which were in New Mexico, according to a report from the Mexican Wolf Interagency Field Team. In 2023 there were 111 livestock kills.

But some Catron County ranchers have seen an increase compared to their experience with livestock depredation in past years during the 2025 calving season, which can stretch from January through April.

Louis Sanders has lost one cow and four calves to wolf kills since January, he said, a problem he's never dealt with at this scale in his 35 years of ranching in northern Catron County. The kills stress out surviving cattle, inhibiting future breeding.

"One would be too many, because the wolf is not welcome here on my private land," Sanders said. "When none of us ranchers wanted them here, and they were forced on us, and now we're dealing with consequences, and it's costing us actually more than money. It's costing us so much time and stress."

Sanders has been patrolling his land every night since January to try to prevent more cattle loss.

Some Catron County residents are fearful the wolves could kill pets or children, according to rancher Dana Barnett.

“If this was happening in Downtown Albuquerque, wolves showing up in people’s backyards, I think it would be taken care of a little quicker,” Barnett said.