

Keep politics out of wolf releases – June 16, 2016

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This spring saw two steps forward for securing the future of the endangered Mexican gray wolves.

Two captive-born pups were introduced into a wild wolf family in the Gila National Forest in late April. And the same week, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service finally agreed to complete a legally required Mexican wolf recovery plan.

But the agreement, submitted to a court almost 40 years to the day after Mexican wolves were protected under the Endangered Species Act, came only because a lawsuit by conservationists forced the agency to follow the law.

Now, two new developments highlight why it's critical that the upcoming recovery plan – as well as current wolf management – be anchored in science, not politics.

First, a court will soon decide whether to grant the request of Gov. Susana Martinez's administration to order removal of the new pups in the Gila and to enjoin future wolf releases.

And in the meantime, in late May, federal trappers captured yet another Mexican wolf.

The circumstances surrounding removal of one of only 97 wolves living in the wild in New Mexico and Arizona reflect an issue central to the recovery effort: requiring reasonable steps to deter wolves from becoming habituated to livestock.

The trapped wolf – a new father – typically preyed on elk. When he turned his attention toward cattle, it wasn't some arbitrary change in dietary preferences – he was drawn to an area littered with carcasses of cows that died not from wolf attacks, but from other causes.

Although scientists emphasize eliminating scavenging opportunities, in the politically tangled geometry of Mexican wolf management, when scavenging contributes to wolves preying on livestock, ranchers are reimbursed for their losses and wolves get punished.

This imbalance stems from the lack of a requirement – like one in the rule that guided the successful reintroduction of gray wolves in the northern Rocky Mountains – stipulating that stock owners must not leave carcasses accessible to wolves.

Although scientists developed draft recovery plans calling for three Mexican wolf populations in the Southwest – including the Grand Canyon and southern Rockies – the service repeatedly shut down further planning.

Now, pending court approval of the agreement, the agency must finalize a recovery plan by Nov. 30, 2017.

Meanwhile, management should change. The Mexican wolves recently declined by 12 percent, from 110 in 2014 to 97 in 2015, and breeding pairs declined from eight to six.

In the 18 years since reintroduction, the federal government has shot 14 wolves and captured dozens more. Of those captured, 21 wolves were killed accidentally, including two this year.

As a result, wild wolves in the Southwest suffer from inbreeding, leading to fewer pups being born.

And scientists caution that “cross-fostering” – the practice of adding pups born in captivity to wolf families in the wild – fails to meet the urgent need to rapidly diversify the population – the new pups won't breed for at least two years – and to broaden its distribution. The new pups should have been released with their parents and older siblings, but the service considered that too politically fraught.

Immunizing wolf-management policies from politics should be a key role for the upcoming recovery plan, which should examine dispassionately what types of releases work best.

Before the recent release in New Mexico and similar cross-fostering of four pups into Arizona, the Obama administration had released just four captive-bred wolves. Three died and the fourth was recaptured.

Even as federal officials were negotiating the recovery plan settlement agreement, they were meeting behind closed doors with officials in four states working to limit the number and distribution of wolves under the plan.

The service should extricate itself from state politics driven by the livestock industry, stop removing wolves from the wild, release five or more family packs into the Gila as scientists recommend, and write a recovery plan that will ensure the Mexican gray wolf contributes to the natural balance in the Southwest and Mexico forever.