

Fed investigation: Wolf program was mishandled

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Catron County officials have long made claims that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has mishandled a program to return the endangered Mexican wolf to the wild.

A federal investigation corroborates the complaints about wolves made by N.M. ranchers. (Associated Press)

A new federal investigation backs them up.

The investigation by the Department of Interior Office of the Inspector General, expected to be made public today, substantiates many of the allegations made by Catron County in a 2013 complaint – namely that the service protected “genetically valuable” wolves in the wild, even after they preyed on cattle, did not tell residents when wolves were near and did not fully compensate ranchers for cattle killed by wolves.

Fish and Wildlife spokesman John Bradley told the **Journal**, “We have been working to improve all aspects of our work with the county and the people who live there” and added that the current field office coordinator “considers this matter closed and resolved.”

The investigation stems from a July 2013 complaint by the Catron County Board of Commissioners, which was referred to the OIG by U.S. Rep. Steve Pearce, R-N.M., in January 2014.

Pearce called the OIG findings “incendiary” and said it pointed to problems at the highest management levels.

“The upper level management of the Fish and Wildlife Service is tolerating a culture of lies, deception and outright manipulation of data,” he said. “I think a whole overhaul is needed.”

‘Three strikes’

Catron County is the heart of the wolf reintroduction program in New Mexico. Although the program’s boundaries legally stretch across the southern half of the state to the Mexican border, in practice, wolves roam mostly in the Gila National Forest.

When locals notice a wolf’s “nuisance behavior” – getting too close to humans or pets or preying on cattle – they may report it to Fish and Wildlife. A wolf is supposed to be removed from the wild after “three strikes,” but the Catron County complaint alleged that certain wolves considered to be especially valuable to the species’ genetic diversity were given passes and nuisance behavior reports were instead assigned to other, less genetically valuable wolves.

The report largely blamed the mishandling of nuisance wolf reports on one staffer who coordinated a field team in Catron County between 2011 and 2013 and who has since been reassigned to another area. Pearce said the fact that the coordinator’s mismanagement went on for two years points to problems at a higher level.

“Although she claimed at first that she did not show preferential treatment toward genetically valuable wolves, later ... she acknowledged that she did treat them ‘differently’ from other wolves,” according to the report. “She said that she gave genetically valuable wolves more care, allowed their nuisance behavior to continue, and provided them more opportunities to breed.”

“Even though the coordinator has changed, basically the culture is the same,” Pearce said.

Ranchers in the area have long been against the reintroductions that began in 1998, since they are prone to losing livestock to wolf depredations. The report substantiates claims that ranchers were not fully compensated for their losses during the former coordinator's tenure.

“Most said that they received compensation for only a small percentage of the cattle they lost,” the report said, adding that ranchers blame the difficulty of confirming that a missing or dead animal has been killed by a wolf as well as unresponsiveness and past interference in investigations by the field office.

The OIG said other allegations by Catron County officials were unsubstantiated.

The OIG could also not prove claims that the Mexican gray wolf is really an “extinct species” or that wolf DNA “is contaminated with that of coyotes or domestic dogs” – a “misperception,” according to a Service biologist quoted in the report, although she added “anything can happen.”

History of lies

Although the allegations investigated by the OIG are now three years old, the relationship between New Mexico and the service has rarely been more fraught.

Last year, New Mexico's Game and Fish Department prohibited the service from releasing wolves into the wild and is suing the service after it released two wolf pups in Catron County anyway earlier this year. The OIG's report is likely to throw fuel on the fire, vindicating ranchers' claims that the service hasn't been cooperative with locals.

The report notes that while the service “has been documenting nuisance complaints and has attempted to improve communication with county residents,” it goes on to say that “many of the county residents we spoke to said they were still concerned about poor communication ... and a perceived lack of concern for public safety.”

Catron County rancher Alan Tackman said the service still falls short when it comes to letting ranchers know when wolves are near. He has lost dozens of cattle and calves to wolves over the years, he said.

“To me, there has been a history of the Fish and Wildlife Service lying to us, misrepresenting things,” he said. “It's hard to say whether it's improved in the last couple of years.”

Michael Robinson of the Center for Biological Diversity said he believes the service has been “overly solicitous of the livestock industry.”

“The bottom line is that the Fish and Wildlife Service is responsive to the livestock industry to the point that the wolf population is again declining,” he said.

There were 97 wolves in the wild in New Mexico and Arizona at the last federal count in early 2016, down from 110 wolves the prior year. Forty-seven of the wolves were found in New Mexico, largely in the Gila.

As for changes made in recent years to improve relations, the report points to the formation of the Mexican Wolf/Livestock Coexistence Council, a board comprised of ranchers, environmentalists and Service workers to review compensation payments that now cover the full market value of the animals lost – “but ranchers still have the difficult task of proving that a wolf caused the kill.”

Pearce said, “The county does not feel any more secure, any more listened to” today compared with three years ago.