

080716 - Official: Wolf issues resolved (Chieftain)

Benjamin Tuggle - Southwest Regional Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Aug 4, 2016

The July 16 Albuquerque Journal editorial “IG’s report reveals lies and manipulation on wolves” does not represent current operations within the Mexican wolf recovery program. As the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s southwest regional director, I would like to set the record straight.

In 2013, I recognized that we were falling short in some key functions pertaining to wolf team operations and made decisive management changes to address those shortcomings, including personnel moves and hiring additional field staff. Three years later, the inspector general’s report recognizes and validates the appropriateness of those changes. The Journal does not acknowledge that the report simply did not substantiate the most egregious complaints, and further implies that many programmatic issues still exist, when in fact the majority have been resolved or were not substantiated.

Recovery of a predator that has long been absent from a working landscape has understandably been met with resistance.

Successfully recovering the Mexican wolf on a working landscape requires that we work closely with local residents, stakeholders and public leaders. We also work hard to communicate effectively and have taken definitive steps to improve our communication protocols.

Our interagency field team of wolf biologists reviews and documents each and every nuisance complaint we receive and responds accordingly. Human safety is our highest priority and I have acted, and always will act, immediately whenever public safety concerns arise – and that includes removal of any wolf (using lethal means if necessary) from the wild that has become a threat to human safety.

Our team of wolf biologists has been out front and continues to make every effort to build connections with the local elected officials and the neighboring ranching communities.

For example, they are in contact with the Catron County wolf interaction investigator on a routine basis to provide updates and exchange reports and information about Mexican wolves.

And, on nearly a daily basis, we speak with landowners and ranchers and provide them with up-to-date information pertaining to the Mexican wolf. This includes the current location of wolves, following up on recent sightings, and any possible release of a wolf into the area.

We recognize that ranchers face daily challenges to sustain livestock production. The service strives to improve our efforts to address wolf-related adverse effects on livestock.

In 2011, I appointed the Mexican Wolf/Livestock Council, which consists of livestock producers, county representatives, environmental organizations and tribes. The council allocates funding to ranchers for depredation compensation, proactive conflict avoidance measures (for example, range riders, fencing and flagging), and payments for the presence of wolves.

From 2011 to 2015 a total of \$664,000 in federal grants, which has been matched by nonfederal funds from Defenders of Wildlife and Mexican Wolf Fund, have been distributed by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. The service also consistently looks for additional resources for the council to use as operational capital.

Depredation determination can be complicated. Not all depredations are discovered in a timely manner, making determination difficult because determination of cause of death is challenging with older remains.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Wildlife Services has the responsibility for making depredation determinations. The council acts to provide compensation for wolf-related livestock losses once a determination has been made.

Make no mistake, recovery of the Mexican wolf on a working landscape is absolutely challenging.

When we identify deficiencies that adversely affect the program, our partners, or our neighbors, we make every effort to address those issues and implement appropriate and proper solutions.

As the southwest regional director, I am responsible for the recovery of the Mexican wolf.

My commitment is to continue to improve communication, transparency and operation of the program to make it more responsible to the public and stakeholders who utilize this working landscape.