

Wolves release cleared Oct 23, 2015

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The U.S. Department of the Interior has granted permission for the release of Mexican wolves into the state despite objections by the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish and the Socorro County Board of Commissioners.

Last week the director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service notified the director of New Mexico Department of Game and Fish that the Mexican Wolf Recovery Program is being exempted from the DOI Fish and Wildlife policy to comply with New Mexico's permitting requirements.

"The Mexican wolf is still at risk of extinction," said U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services Public Affairs Specialist Jeff Humphrey. "It is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's obligation under the law to recover this species, and reintroductions into the wild from the more genetically diverse captive population are an essential part of that recovery process. Our preference is always to work collaboratively with states and we ask New Mexico to reengage with us in these efforts. We look forward to continuing our productive species recovery work with New Mexico Department of Game and Fish on a host of other threatened and endangered species in the state."

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service applied for permission with the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish earlier this year. The department denied the request last month. The Socorro County Board of Commissioners passed a resolution last week opposing the release and is considering an ordinance making it illegal to release wolves on ranch land in the county.

County Attorney Adren Nance told commissioners there was a question of whether the ordinance was enforceable on federal land.

Even with permission from the DOI, the release of the wolves by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service may not come for quite some time, Humphrey said.

"For 2016, our process is a bit more complicated, and potentially delayed, because we are still working with the Forest Service and the public to identify new initial release sites in the recently expanded Mexican Wolf Experimental Population Area (MWEPA)," Humphrey said.

Possible release sites in Socorro County, however, have been identified.

"These potential initial release sites, if approved, will be evaluated along with previously identified release sites in other MWEPA areas to determine the best available sites," Humphrey said.

Socorro County contains portions of Zone 1 and Zone 2 of the MWEPA. Zone 1 (specifically for Socorro County, the Magdalena Ranger District of the Cibola National Forest) is an area where Mexican wolves can naturally disperse and occupy, and where Mexican wolves may be initially released from captivity or translocated. (Translocation is the release of wolves that have already been in the wild.) Zone 2 (specifically for Socorro County, it is the remainder of the County that is not Zone 1), is an area within the MWEPA where wolves are allowed to naturally disperse and occupy, and where Mexican wolves may be translocated.

The number of wolves the U.S. Fish and Wildlife service plans to release into areas of Arizona and New Mexico has not been determined. The delay in the release has caused the service to shelve its previous plan.

"Last spring we'd requested permits for up to 10 pups (for cross-fostering) and a pair of adults and their progeny," Humphrey said. "The window/season for such releases has passed; so those releases aren't imminent."

The Mexican wolf population has grown for several years in a row, reaching its highest population size to date as of the 2014 end of year count, at a minimum of 110 wolves.

“We will conduct our 2015 annual count in January, 2016,” Humphrey said.

At the 2014 end of year count, the wolves were approximately equally spread between the two states, with Arizona having several more than New Mexico.

Currently, the location of the population can best be tracked using the “Occupied Range” map, available on the U.S. Fish and Wildlife website at: <http://www.fws.gov/southwest/es/mexicanwolf/TADC.cfm>. People can click on the map for a larger version of it. This map also indicates the most recent aerial locations of the radio-collared wolves.

“While the growth of the population is a positive step for the program, we are concerned about the genetic health of the population,” Humphrey said. “The wild population does not have adequate gene diversity, which compromises the health of individual wolves (inbreeding) and the overall health of the population. We can improve the gene diversity of the wild population by releasing wolves from captivity with genes not already represented in the wild population. In other words, our releases from captivity at this time will be aimed at improving the genetic situation rather than increasing the size of the population, which is growing naturally without the aid of initial releases.”

Humphrey said the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services understands concerns about the potential for attacks on livestock or people.

“Human safety remains of utmost concern to the Service,” Humphrey said. “We advise the public to always take the necessary steps and precautions to remain safe when in nature. We have not documented any cases of Mexican wolf attacks on a person. The Endangered Species Act, as well as our regulations for the MWEPA, allow for the take (including injuring or killing) of a Mexican wolf in self-defense or the defense of others. Our regulations also provide for opportunistic harassment and intentional harassment of Mexican wolves. “

The regulations also allow for the take of a Mexican wolf under various circumstances to protect pet dogs and livestock. See http://www.fws.gov/southwest/es/mexicanwolf/pdf/Mx_wolf_10j_final_rule_to_OFR.pdf for the complete rules and regulations