

State seeking stop to release of wolves

By [Lauren Villagran / Journal Staff Writer - Las Cruces Bureau](#)

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The New Mexico Department of Game and Fish is seeking a temporary restraining order in state District Court to prevent the federal government from releasing endangered Mexican gray wolves in New Mexico.

“Basically we are asking the court to review our case and to halt any imminent releases” by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, said Game and Fish spokesman Chris Chadwick. “We asked them to not conduct any releases at this time and they refused. This is basically the only remedy we had left.”

The state and federal government have been embroiled in a fight over the Mexican wolf recovery program for more than a year now, and the temporary restraining order request is the state’s latest strike against what it sees as federal government overreach.

Fish and Wildlife said it does not comment on pending litigation.

Despite state opposition, Fish and Wildlife released two captive-born Mexican wolf pups into a wild wolf den in Catron County last month as part of its ongoing effort to recover the struggling species in New Mexico and Arizona.

Game and Fish denied the Fish and Wildlife permits last year to release wolves in the state, citing concerns with the federal government’s management of the recovery program. The federal agency vowed to carry on, citing its obligation under the Endangered Species Act to recover the species – whose prospects for survival remain fragile, experts say, with fewer than 100 wolves in the wild.

The endangered Mexican gray wolf is in the middle of a fight between state and federal agencies about their release into the wild. (Courtesy of ABQ BioPark)

In a statement, Game and Fish Director Alexandra Sandoval called the recent wolf releases “unpermitted and illegal” and said the action “demonstrates a disregard for our state’s sovereignty.”

Game and Fish has said it wants the Fish and Wildlife to come up with a detailed, science-based recovery plan before conducting any wolf recovery activities in New Mexico. The current recovery plan dates to the 1980s and is widely regarded as being outdated.

In a recent court settlement with environmental groups, Fish and Wildlife agreed to develop a recovery plan by 2017 that will define what “recovery” means in terms of wolf numbers and habitat.

The wild wolf population declined at last count to 97 wolves in New Mexico and Arizona, down from 110 the previous year, according to Fish and Wildlife.

Recent attempts at mediating the conflict have apparently failed.

On Monday, Game and Fish said it met with representatives from Fish and Wildlife and attorneys from the U.S. Department of Justice to offer “alternative solutions” to resolve the issues. Fish and Wildlife notified Game and Fish on Wednesday that it had declined the proposals, which were not specified.

Game and Fish has notified Fish and Wildlife that it intends to sue in federal court over the wolf releases. The temporary restraining order being sought in the 7th Judicial District in is separate from that notice, Chadwick said.