

Call to the wild

Mexican gray wolf recovery program faces challenges

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By Scott Turner — El Defensor Chieftain Editor - Jul 27, 2017 A Mexican gray wolf faces a 28 percent chance of survival during the first year it is released in the wild.

“That first year is extremely difficult,” U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service official Tracy Melbihess said at the Mexican wolf draft recovery plan meeting last Thursday in Truth or Consequences.

That is one of the challenges facing federal wildlife officials in their effort to get the sub-species of the gray wolf off the endangered species list.

“We want the population to be self-sustaining, healthy and robust,” Melbihess said.

That may be easier said than done.

If the Mexican gray wolf population averages 320 in the wild in the United States over an eight-year period, the animal could be removed from the endangered species list.

That is one of the goals of the Mexican Wolf draft recovery plan, Melbihess said. Another goal is to release enough wolves into the wild so that the population will be genetically diverse.

Melbihess said wolves in the U.S. region of the recovery area “are very related to one another.”

“That is not a good thing,” Melbihess said. “We have to do more.”

That includes a goal of having 22 wolves released from captive facilities surviving to breeding age in the time it takes for the Mexican wolf to reach the point where it is removed from the endangered species list.

Because of the low survival rate in that first year, Melbihess said as many as 70 wolves may have to be released into the wild during the next 25-to-35 years the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service expects it will take to reach that goal.

“That is not set in stone,” Melbihess said. “If the survival rate goes up fewer wolves could be released.”

There are currently 270 captive wolves in 50 facilities around the country, many of them zoos. The Sevilleta National Wildlife Refuge in north Socorro County has a captive wolf facility that is playing a key role in the recovery program.

Mexican Wolf Recovery Program Assistant Coordinator Maggie Dwire told *El Defensor Chieftain* in a previous interview that one of the goals of the facility was to help wolves adapt to living in the wild. That includes teaching them to catch and eat their own prey, which includes deer, elk and smaller mammals.

Dwire said wolf-human interaction is reduced at the facility. Dwire oversees the facility.

Dwire also said wolves are monitored once they are released in the wild. If it appears a wolf is having trouble surviving into the wild, it could be removed.

One of the ways wolves are released into the wild is through cross-fostering where pups are placed into wild dens, Melbihess said.

That was the case recently when two pups were placed in a den in Catron County, which is located in a zone that includes the Apache National Forest in Arizona and the Cibola and Gila national forests in New Mexico where wolves have been released since 1998.

The entire release area is south of Interstate 40 in Arizona and New Mexico.

Melbiness said wolves are released in areas where they historically lived and have a habitat suitable for survival. She said they are also released where human contact is minimal, and as far away from roads as possible.

Human contact is considered one of the biggest threats to survival with wolves being poisoned, shot or hit by vehicles.

The count at the end of 2016 had the U.S. population at 113.

The population in Mexico is 28, with the releases starting much later across the border. In Mexico, federal agencies are focusing on the Sierra Madre Occidental Mountains in Sonora, Durango and Chihuahua.

The goal for the population in Mexico is 170 over an eight-year period. The Mexican wolf population is considered much more genetically diverse than the population in the U.S.