

# Wolf recovery at crossroads in the Southwest

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This Jan. 26, 1998 file photo shows a Mexican gray wolf moving through his new home, a third of an acre pen after being released from a cage in Hannagan Meadows, Ariz. A decade has passed since the U.S. government began releasing Mexican wolves into the wild in an effort to return the endangered animal to its historic range in the Southwest. It hasn't worked out \_ for the wolves, for ranchers, for conservationists or for federal biologists. (AP Photo/Jeff Robbins, File)

(AP) -- A decade has passed since the federal government began releasing Mexican wolves into the wild in an effort to return the endangered animal to its historic range in the Southwest. It hasn't worked out - for the wolves, for ranchers, for conservationists or for federal biologists.

And that has resulted in frustration and resentment by many involved in

the reintroduction program centered along the Arizona-New Mexico border, a landscape of sprawling pine and spruce forests, cold-water lakes and clear streams.

"I believe in being a good steward of the land and preserving it for generations to come, but this is ridiculous," said Ed Wehrheim, who heads the commission in Catron County, in the heart of wolf country. "I've had ranchers' wives come to me just bawling because everything they and their parents have worked for is going down the drain."

Four ranches have gone out of business since the wolf reintroduction began and another four are expected to do the same before next summer, Wehrheim said.

The region has been hit by drought and cattle prices aren't what they used to be, but Wehrheim said pressure from [environmentalists](#) and hundreds of livestock kills by Mexican gray wolves over the past decade have only made things worse.

Environmentalists argue that grazing practices are part of the problem and the wolf reintroduction program has failed because of mismanagement by the federal government.

In the middle stands Bud Fazio, coordinator of the Mexican gray wolf reintroduction program.

The program is at a crossroads and Fazio said he hopes to bring everyone back to the table to find a way to move forward, quell concerns of critical environmentalists and gain the confidence of wary ranchers.

"One thing about wolves is they bring out extreme emotions and feelings and attitudes, so it is an extra challenge," he said. "There is some middle ground. There is some balance, but my sense is that so far we haven't

found that in the Southwest and we need to."

A subspecies of the [gray wolf](#), the Mexican wolf was exterminated in the wild by the 1930s. The government began reintroducing wolves in 1998 along the Arizona-New Mexico line, in a territory of more than 4 million acres interspersed with forests, private land and towns.

There are about 50 wolves in the wild in Arizona and New Mexico, but that's half of what biologists had hoped to have by now.

Federal, state and other officials involved in wolf recovery are scheduled to meet next week in Albuquerque for the first of many "frank discussions" about the future of the program, Fazio said.

Part of the reason for the talks is a recent settlement with environmentalists that called for an end to a three-strikes rule that allowed wildlife managers to trap or shoot wolves that had killed at least three head of livestock within a year's time.

The settlement also made clear that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has control over the program, rather than a committee formed in 2003 to bring other agencies into the recovery effort.

The original rule that established the reintroduction program still allows managers to remove problem wolves, but Fazio said officials will now consider many factors - such as the wolf's genetic value to the program and its reproductive success - before making decisions on keeping an animal in the wild.

"Everything remains on the table in terms of an option for managing wolves and that does include removal of live animals or lethal removal," Fazio said. "What is different is that a whole suite of things, broader than before, will be taken into account."

Wehrheim and the New Mexico Cattle Growers' Association maintain the settlement changes nothing because the wolf program had already started to leave wolves with more than three strikes in the wild. They pointed to the Middle Fork pack, which was blamed for 10 livestock kills over a two-month period.

The pack includes four pups and two adults, both of which are missing their front left paws.

Federal biologists say the pack is now hunting elk and relying less on strategically placed food caches.

Ranchers say that leaving the maimed wolves in the wild encourages them to go after easy prey such as calves.

"It's a problem of the program, not a problem of the wolf," Catron County Manager Bill Aymar said.

The Center for Biological Diversity also has been critical of the program, but the group believes the wolves should be left in the wild and critical habitat declared for the species to recover.

Wehrheim told New Mexico legislators in Santa Fe this week that ranchers in southwestern New Mexico and southeastern Arizona can't afford to live with the wolves if the program remains unchanged and the federal government's plan for compensating livestock losses goes unfunded.

"It's very, very serious for Catron County and all of the wolf recovery area," he said. "We don't see any ranching existing with the wolf. We don't see any hunting existing with the [wolf](#). We're talking tens of millions of dollars of loss."

He gave the example of a third-generation ranch that harvested about 200 calves annually before going out of business earlier this year. The operation was capable of bringing in more than \$1 million in tax and other revenues to the county.

Tod Stevenson, director of the New Mexico Game and Fish Department, testified that his agency and the state want to make sure Catron County and its ranchers can continue to survive on the landscape.

"That's the best way that we can continue to manage wildlife, is to have them as partners out there on the ground," he said. "It's critical that we come up with a balance to achieve that."

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