

Growth slows for endangered Mexican gray wolf population

March 30 2022, by Susan Montoya Bryan



This image provided by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service shows members of the Mexican Wolf Interagency Field Team processing a wolf during an annual count in January 2022 in southwestern New Mexico. Officials announced Wednesday, March 30, 2022, that the U.S. population of Mexican wolves has increased by 5% since the previous year, raising the total number of wolves in the wild in New Mexico and Arizona to at least 196 animals. Credit: Susan Dicks/Mexican Wolf Interagency Field Team via AP

There are now more Mexican gray wolves roaming the southwestern U.S. than at any time since the federal government started to reintroduce the endangered species, wildlife managers said Wednesday.

The results of the latest annual survey of the wolves show there are at least 196 in the wild in New Mexico and Arizona—the sixth straight year that wolf population has increased.

But officials with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said the population's growth in 2021 was tempered by higher than average pup mortality. Life was made more difficult for the wolves because of a persistent drought that has resulted in low precipitation and scant snowpack, the officials said.

Fewer than 40% of pups survived through the end of the year, though more breeding pairs were recorded in 2021.

"We are happy to see the wild population of Mexican wolves continue to grow year after year," said Brady McGee, coordinator of the Mexican gray wolf recovery program. "The service and our partners remain focused on recovery through improving the genetic health of the wild population and reducing threats, while also working to minimize conflicts with livestock."

Ranchers continue to have concerns about livestock killed by the wolves, saying efforts to scare the predators away from livestock—by horse riders, nonlethal shots fired from guns and flags put up on fences near cattle—have not been effective enough. Feeding caches for the wolves are also set up by officials to lure wolves away from livestock.

State Rep. Rebecca Dow sent a letter to McGee earlier this month about two separate livestock kills on a grazing allotment in her district. The Republican from the small city of Truth or Consequences said Wednesday that she learned about ranchers forced to camp out on their property to protect their herds.

"Ranching is a way of life in our district and the release of these wolves without proper management is taking away from our community's right to earn a living," said Dow, who is seeking the GOP gubernatorial nomination.

Unlike wolf reintroductions in Yellowstone National Park and elsewhere in the northern U.S., wildlife managers in the Southwest must deal with a climate that has encouraged a year-round livestock calving season, meaning wolves can prey on the livestock year-round instead of several months of the year.



This image provided by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service shows members of the Mexican Wolf Interagency Field Team processing a sedated wolf during an annual count in January 2022 in southwestern New Mexico. Officials announced Wednesday, March 30, 2022, that the U.S. population of Mexican wolves has increased by 5% since the previous year, raising the total number of wolves in the wild in New Mexico and Arizona to at least 196 animals. Credit: Susan Dicks/Mexican Wolf Interagency Field Team via AP

The rarest subspecies of gray wolf in North America, the Mexican wolf was listed as endangered in the 1970s and a U.S.-Mexico captive breeding program was started with the seven remaining wolves in existence.

It's estimated that thousands of Mexican wolves once roamed from central Mexico to New Mexico, southern Arizona and Texas. Predator eradication programs began in the late 1800s. Within several decades, the predators were all but eliminated from the wild.

There are currently about 380 Mexican wolves in more than 60 zoos and other facilities in the two countries. In Mexico, the wild population numbers around 40, officials have said.

The wolf recovery team placed 22 captive-born pups into seven wild dens in 2021 as part of a cross-fostering program aimed at boosting the population's genetic diversity. Officials said two of the pups have since been captured and collared and that the effort to determine how many survived will continue this year.

The team also documented 25 wolf deaths in 2021. Officials rarely release many details about those cases that involve illegal shootings.

Environmentalists had hoped the U.S. population would have topped 200

in 2021. They have been pressuring the Fish and Wildlife Service to release more captive wolf packs and to allow the predators to establish new packs in areas beyond the current recovery zone in southwestern New Mexico and southeastern Arizona.

The environmentalists have said that the southern Rockies and the Grand Canyon area would be suitable wolf habitat.

"The disappointing lack of significant growth is a sign that this recovery paradigm is not working," Chris Smith with the WildEarth Guardians group said in a statement.

Wolves "need better protection and more room to roam and re-establish themselves. U.S. Fish and Wildlife continues to flout the science and bow to political pressure," Smith said.

Federal officials are expected this summer to finalize a new rule that will govern management of Mexican wolves in the U.S.

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Citation: Growth slows for endangered Mexican gray wolf population (2022, March 30) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-03-growth-endangered-mexican-gray-wolf.html>

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