

A Look Beyond

Recovery of the Mexican Gray Wolf Requires a New Plan

by Michael J. Robinson

The sole wild Mexican gray wolf population in the world is operated like a put-and-take fishery: Many wolves are released from captivity, then removed, and more wolves are put in. But even new releases are not sufficient to stave off inbreeding depression, as low reproductive rates may indicate. To create a viable wild population before the captive population also begins to lose its genetic diversity, more wolves will have to be allowed to live and reproduce. And that means predator control will have to be greatly reduced.

Predator control against Mexican wolves is premised on keeping them confined within an arbitrary political boundary and on responding to livestock depredations. In both cases, the rules for Mexican wolves are different from those in the northern Rocky Mountains. Unlike its rules for any other endangered species, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has bound itself to remove any Mexican wolf living outside the official recovery area and the adjoining Fort Apache Indian Reservation (where they have been welcomed), even if it is on public lands. And unlike the rule for the reintroduction to Yellowstone and central Idaho, the southwestern reintroduction rule does not protect wolves from scavenging on cattle and horse carcasses, homing in on livestock, and then being subject to predator control.

A panel of independent scientists convened by the Service to conduct the official Mexican Wolf Reintroduction Three-Year Review (2001) had urged that wolves be allowed to

roam freely, and that ranchers using public lands be required to remove or render inedible (as by lime) the carcasses of cattle and horses that die of non-wolf causes. Those changes are still urgently needed today to ensure more wolves are allowed to live in the wild.

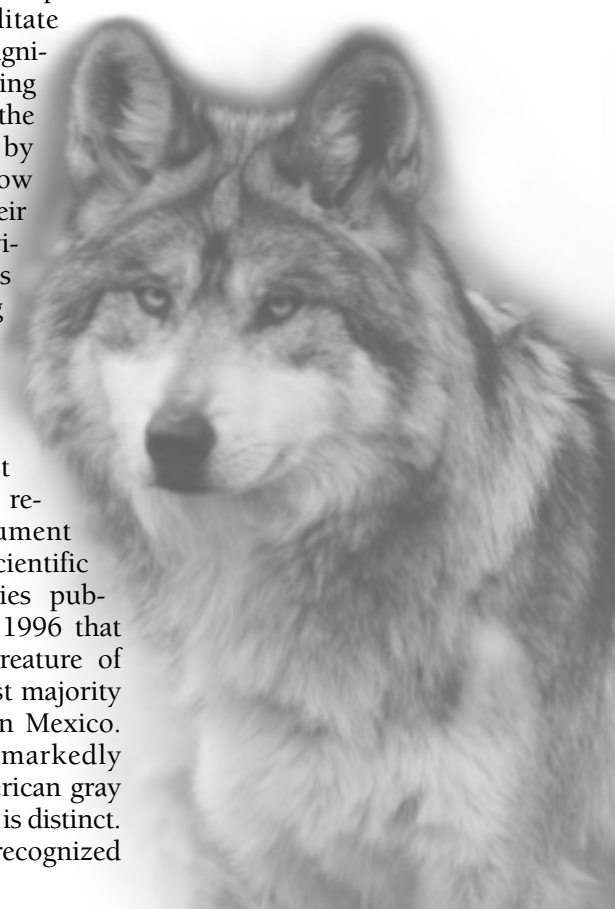
The livestock industry's resistance to removing dead stock on the public lands raises the question of whether Mexican wolves and livestock are compatible. Ranchers insist they are not. If they are correct, then the Endangered Species Act will require that public lands be managed to facilitate recovery. That may entail significant reductions in stocking rates. Congress could ease the transition for ranchers by passing legislation to allow them to voluntarily cede their public lands grazing privileges in return for a generous pay-off; the former grazing allotments would be placed permanently off-limits for livestock.

Recovery criteria for the Mexican gray wolf must be spelled out in a new recovery plan. That document should be guided by the scientific consensus in seven studies published between 1929 and 1996 that the lobo is primarily a creature of the desert, and that the vast majority of its original range was in Mexico. *Canis lupus baileyi* is markedly smaller than other American gray wolves, and its morphology is distinct. The lobo's northernmost recognized

range was south of the Mogollon highlands where it now roams. In an elk-less landscape, preying on diminutive Coues whitetail deer and pig-like javelinas and navigating prickly deserts, small size helped survival.

Recovery areas must include the Sky Island Mountains of southeastern Arizona and southwestern New Mexico to link wolves in the Mogollon highlands of Arizona and New Mexico with those that will one day also roam the Sierra Madres in Mexico. ■

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