

## **Mexican Wolf Reintroduction Project**

### **Frequently Asked Questions**

#### **Q: What is a Mexican wolf?**

A: The Mexican wolf (*Canis lupus bailey*) is the rarest, smallest, southernmost and most genetically distinct subspecies of the North American gray wolf. Historically, the Mexican wolf was found throughout mountainous regions from central Mexico in the south, northward into Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, Colorado and west Texas. Mexican wolves typically weigh 50 to 80 pounds and measure about 5 1/2 feet from nose to tail (about the size of an adult German shepherd). They have a distinctive, richly colored coat of buff, gray, rust, tan and black. Like other wolves, Mexican wolves have a complex social structure and live in extended family groups, consisting of an adult mated pair and their offspring. Wolves hunt cooperatively to bring down prey animals, usually much larger than themselves. Larger-sized native prey for Mexican wolves includes elk, mule deer and white-tailed deer.

#### **Q: How did the Mexican wolf become endangered?**

A: Intensive predator removal efforts from the late-1800s to the mid-1900s extirpated the Mexican wolf from the wild in the portion of its range found in the United States. The Mexican wolf was listed as "endangered" on the Federal List of Threatened and Endangered Species in 1976.

#### **Q: What is the reintroduction plan?**

A: The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), in cooperation with the Arizona Game and Fish Department (AGFD), U.S.D.A. Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service – Wildlife Services (WS) and U.S. Forest Service (USFS), began releasing captive-reared Mexican wolves into the designated "primary recovery zone" in the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests in east-central Arizona in 1998. Released wolves and their progeny have been designated as a nonessential experimental population under a special provision (10(j) Rule) of the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The recovery area is referred to as the "Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area." The reintroduction objective is to re-establish a self-sustaining wild population of Mexican wolves to complement recovery efforts of the subspecies in Mexico, where 90 percent of the wolves' historical core range exists.

At the beginning of the reintroduction project, captive-raised wolves were released periodically to the wild to help grow the population. With the birth of the first wild-born litter from a wild-born parent in 2002, the Mexican Wolf Reintroduction Project entered into a new phase, whereby natural reproduction began to replace the need to release captive-reared wolves.

**Q: Why was the Blue Range area selected for reintroduction of Mexican wolves?**

A: The Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area (BRWRA), consisting of the Apache portion of the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests and the Gila National Forest in west-central New Mexico, has a large, multi-species native prey base, is resilient to drought, and contains over 6,000 square miles of habitat in historic range for wolves to colonize.

**Q: What is a non-essential experimental population?**

A: The Endangered Species Act allows reintroduced populations of threatened or endangered species to be designated "experimental populations" and for the further designation of these populations as "essential" or "nonessential" to the continued existence of the species. Congress added this provision to the Act in 1982 to increase management flexibility during reintroductions of listed species. The benefits of this designation are increased flexibility to manage the wolves in the field on a day-to-day basis. It also helps mitigate specific impacts, respond to particular needs of the reintroduced population, and address concerns of local citizens. For example, major land-use restrictions are not imposed due to the presence of an endangered species; livestock depredation situations can be addressed immediately; and, wolves can be moved if necessary without any additional permits (as would be required if the wolves were to retain their "endangered" status).

**Q: Are wolves adequately protected with the nonessential experimental designation?**

A: Nonessential experimental Mexican wolves are still protected under the ESA. The special rules for the nonessential experimental population are very specific on if, when and how management actions can be taken to control wolves that depredate livestock. Also, the designation allows greater management flexibility to capture, monitor or translocate animals. Many wolf biologists believe that wolf recovery cannot be achieved successfully without management to integrate wolves with human populations and livestock production. Selective control of individual wolves that depredate livestock encourages wolves that focus on wild prey and fosters tolerance of wolves by livestock producers. This increases public support for wolves and enhances the success of

recovery efforts.

**Q: What are some reintroduction techniques that are used?**

A: The Mexican Wolf Reintroduction Project utilizes adaptive management for wolf recovery. This means that all management techniques are evaluated continually and, if necessary, revised. The partners recently used cross-fostering, where pups from a genetically-important pack with little rearing experience are transferred to a similar-age litter in a more experienced pack, successfully for the first time.

**Q: How are wolves monitored?**

A: All wolves released are fitted with radio collars. In addition, the Interagency Field Team conducts collaring efforts throughout the year to replace old collars with limited battery life and fit collars to previously uncollared animals. Systematic telemetry surveys are conducted daily by land or air to monitor wolf locations and activities.

**Q: Does wolf reintroduction affect private land?**

A: With the permission of a landowner, the Interagency Field Team can provide assistance for managing or controlling wolves on private land. Several proven options exist for discouraging wolves away from private lands and livestock operations including the use of fencing, fladry, range riders and others. Private landowners are permitted to harass a wolf away from them and their property without injuring it. In some instances, livestock owners and their agents may be permitted to kill a wolf that is attacking livestock on their private land.

**Q: Will land-use restrictions be necessary under the reintroduction plan?**

A: The reintroduction plan contains no land-use restrictions or prohibitions on private and tribal lands and no major restrictions on public lands. If needed, certain uses can be temporarily restricted on public lands within one mile of release pens, dens and rendezvous sites (specific areas pups use after they leave the den). Outside these few, small areas where temporary restrictions may be imposed, traditional uses of public lands, such as logging, grazing, mining, military activities, hunting, hiking and camping will be unaffected by Mexican wolf reintroduction.

**Q: Can livestock producers be compensated for livestock killed by wolves?**

A: In 2014, a new paradigm was introduced that created incentives for ranching in ways that promote self-sustaining Mexican wolf populations, viable ranching operations and healthy western landscapes. The Mexican Wolf/Livestock Coexistence Council issues “Payments for Wolf Presence” to Arizona and New Mexico livestock operators who qualify under the Coexistence Plan. Payments for presence of Mexican wolves, the key component of the plan, address the negative financial impacts on livestock producers that accompany Mexican wolf recovery. The innovative Coexistence Plan is comprised of three core strategies: payments for wolf presence, funding for conflict avoidance measures, and continued funding for depredation compensation.

**Q: Why aren't more captive-reared wolves released to the wild to grow the population more quickly?**

A: The release of captive-reared wolves must be done carefully and strategically to maximize the animal's chances of success and to meet the objectives of the reintroduction effort like increasing genetic diversity. Adjustment to the wild presents a challenge for any captive-reared animal and not all captive wolves are suitable for release. While many captive-reared wolves released to the wild have immediately demonstrated the retention of wild behavior upon release, some demonstrated more habituated behaviors that lead to human-wolf-livestock conflicts. The reintroduction effort aims to minimize the chance of human-wolf-livestock conflict and therefore, follows a very thorough, strategic reintroduction plan.

**Q: How will other wildlife populations be affected by wolves?**

A: Predator-prey interactions are extremely complex and generally require long-term study. However, some general statements can be made. Wolves and other predators do not cause their prey to go extinct. If they did, predators themselves would starve. Predators can limit prey populations though. A major advantage of wolves and other predators to prey populations is that they can reduce nutritional stress on prey animals by keeping populations within the capacity of the habitat to support them. This in turn enhances the health of prey animals, which results in good reproductive and survival rates in a population. The department, as the trust authority for all wildlife in Arizona, frequently studies the wolves' prey populations to ensure their stability.

**Q: Are Mexican wolves dangerous to humans?**

A: There have been no documented cases of a wild Mexican wolf attacking or killing a human. In fact, wolf attacks worldwide are extremely rare.

**Q: Do wolves pose a danger to my pets?**

A: To protect both the pet and wildlife, pets should always be carefully monitored by their owners in areas where they may encounter native wildlife, such as national forests or parks. Unsupervised or unleashed dogs that stray into wolf territories are at risk. Wolves are territorial and may show aggression towards other canines that enter their territories, especially during denning season (April through May).

Bear and lion hunters who hunt with dogs may wish to contact Project personnel at (888) 459-9653 to receive additional information on wolf locations before running dogs in the BRWRA.

**Q: How is the public kept informed of the status and progress of the Mexican Wolf Reintroduction Project?**

A: Project personnel are committed to an open dialogue with local communities and other interested parties as Mexican wolf reintroduction continues to move forward. Project personnel produce a monthly update for the public, which is posted on the USFWS and Arizona Game and Fish Department websites. A weekly aerial telemetry flight location map for Mexican wolves is also available on these websites. Biologists frequently provide presentations to public groups to facilitate communication between project staff and affected communities. Information and interaction activities are developed with input from the public and evaluated with the objective of addressing current needs and concerns.

**Q: Does the Interagency Field Team (IFT) investigate all livestock depredations?**

A: The IFT investigates all suspected or reported wolf depredations and wolf-human conflicts usually within 24 hours and reports the results appropriately.

**Q: Does the IFT report wolf kills of cattle?**

A: The IFT has reported and continues to report all depredations found from the air during weekly radio-telemetry flights or during on-the-ground monitoring activities. The IFT has found and reported dead livestock consistently throughout the years, with most of the depredations being initially discovered by the IFT.

**Q: Does the IFT pick up cattle carcasses before ranchers can find them in order to hide evidence of wolf depredations?**

A: No. All livestock carcasses that the IFT finds are left in the area and are reported to the appropriate livestock operator. At a minimum, the IFT reports the dead animal to the permittees via phone or often makes the report in person. The IFT works diligently towards finding remains of all prey items taken by Mexican wolves and reports them accordingly. With livestock owner permission, the IFT has removed, or otherwise made unavailable to wolves, some cattle carcasses.

**Q: Do Mexican wolves have to be supplementally fed to survive?**

A: The IFT provides "carnivore logs," made for zoo carnivores, and carcasses of road-killed ungulates to wolves following initial releases or translocations. This is kept to a minimum and is generally done for one to two months following the release/translocation or until the wolves begin to find food on their own. In addition, the IFT does sometimes feed wolves in association with control or trapping actions (for example, to localize the group for more efficient removal), or when wolf deaths or injuries require temporary supplemental feeding to sustain surviving wolves, especially females shortly before or after giving birth to pups. Outside of these specific instances, the IFT does not feed wolves. Once the packs have become established in an area, they are not fed by the IFT, and these packs must kill and scavenge sufficient prey to meet the pack's biological needs.

**Q: Some Mexican wolves look sick. Are they diseased or starving?**

A: Like most mammals, wolves shed hair during the late spring and summer. The public sometimes reports wolves as being diseased, sick or skinny during this period, especially if the wolves are wet. While it is true Mexican wolves can look thin and "mangy" during these times, often the same pack may have animals that are described as big and healthy during winter periods. It is important to recognize that Mexican wolves are somewhat smaller than their northern counterparts, and they rarely look as well groomed and fed as captive wolves seen on TV and in other mass media.

**Q: Are all Mexican wolves from captive animals and, therefore, unafraid of humans and more likely to be aggressive or attack people?**

A: Today's wild Mexican wolf population is entirely descended from captive wolves. However, the population now has four generations of wild-born wolves that display natural, wild characteristics. Any captive-reared wolves that were released in the past were selected for avoidance and fear of humans. Great care was taken to not socialize or habituate any wolf that was released to humans to minimize the chance for conflict.

There have been no documented cases of a wild Mexican wolf attacking or killing a human. In fact, wolf attacks worldwide are extremely rare.

**Q: Are the animals present in the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area true wolves or hybrids?**

A: According to research scientists, there are three known pure lineages of the Mexican wolf: McBride, Ghost Ranch and Aragon. Geneticists have verified that each of the three lineages represent purebred Mexican wolves. DNA testing of today's wild Mexican wolf population is done on a regular basis and there is no evidence to suggest hybridization with dogs or other canids.

There have been two incidents of wild Mexican wolves breeding with a domestic canine and in both cases the hybrid pups were humanely euthanized after genetic testing confirmed the hybridization. The litters were euthanized to protect the genetic integrity of the Mexican wolf. Genetic testing and analysis of all captured animals continues to be an important component of the Mexican wolf reintroduction program.

**Q: Can Mexican wolves kill elk?**

A: Although the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) prepared before the first wolves were released suggested that deer would be the primary prey for Mexican wolves, scat analysis shows that wolves are primarily killing and feeding on elk. Since the EIS was published in 1996, surveys show that elk populations within the reintroduction area have expanded, while deer populations have diminished. Monitoring by the IFT and independent researchers shows that wolves prey upon all sex and age classes of elk, but primarily the youngest and oldest age classes.

**Q: Does the IFT shoot elk to feed the wolves?**

A: No, the IFT does not kill elk to feed wolves. Elk that die from other causes (primarily road kill) are sometimes salvaged to provide supplemental food for wolves.

**Q: Are there plans to reintroduce grizzly bears or jaguars to the Southwest as part of this recovery effort?**

A: No. The USFWS has no plans to reintroduce either the grizzly bear or the jaguar to the Southwest. Reintroduction of Mexican wolves to the Blue Range area of Arizona and New Mexico involved extensive scoping, planning, biological studies, public

meetings, and completion of an Environmental Impact Statement, all of which focused solely on the Mexican wolf.

Before any species listed as threatened or endangered under the ESA can be reintroduced to portions of its historic range, an extensive array of legal requirements - planning, studies, public involvement and environmental compliance - must be performed and met. This process can occur only after a species recovery team approves the initial concept.