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MEXICAN GRAY WOLVES SEE A SMALL BOOST IN NUMBERS BUT STILL TEETER ON THE BRINK OF EXTINCTION

Mexican gray wolf population count increases, but lobos are still among rarest species in the southwestern U.S.

Phoenix, Arizona – In good news, the wild population of Mexican gray wolves has seen a small increase this past year. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (Service) released the results of its 2021 wild Mexican gray wolf population count today, revealing that the number of wolves increased slightly to a minimum of 196 wolves. However, this slight increase of 5% over 2020's estimate is dampened by revelations of high mortality (including illegal killing), low pup survival, and a deepening genetic crisis that continue to threaten the wild population. Additionally, for political reasons, the Service has held back well-bonded packs in captivity, instead of releasing them into the wild, despite suitable and diverse family groups being available and ready for release from captive breeding facilities.

"While 144 pups were born in 2021, only 56 survived into their first year. It's clear that Mexican wolves need the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to more actively and diligently work for their recovery. They need to immediately implement plans to release well-bonded packs versus relying on cross-fostering of pups to recover this population of highly endangered wolves," said Sandy Bahr, chapter director for Sierra Club's Grand Canyon (Arizona) Chapter. "We need more wild wolves in more places in the Southwest to ensure their sustained recovery."

Wolves need access to additional suitable habitat where packs can spread out and provide ecological benefits as a keystone species. Unfortunately, political opposition to expanded habitat into northern Arizona and New Mexico has hampered the recovery of the species by preventing multiple subpopulations that science shows the lobos need.

“We’re happy that there are a few more Mexican gray wolves in the wild than last year,” said Greta Anderson, deputy director of Western Watersheds Project. “But there’s a long way to go yet towards full recovery, and wildlife managers and policymakers are going to need to move fast to ensure the population has enough genetic diversity and geographic space to have a real shot at survival in this fast-changing climate.”

“The disappointing lack of significant growth is a sign that this recovery paradigm is not working,” said Chris Smith, southwest wildlife advocate for WildEarth Guardians. “Lobos 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.”

Forward-thinking management is needed to ensure that Mexican gray wolves have the freedom to roam and the legal protection they need to thrive in the wild, including management policies that adequately address the impacts of illegal killing, the risk of genetic inbreeding, climate change, and habitat encroachment.

“The positive trend in the number of Mexican gray wolves in the wild is welcome news, but the total of only 196 lobos is keeping them among the most critically endangered animals in the world,” commented Kelly Burke, executive director of Wild Arizona. “At a time when we are learning that having wolves in the wild here in the Southwest may help save us from the worst of climate change effects, the Service needs to boldly aid, not hinder, lobo recovery.”

Background on Mexican Gray Wolves:

The lobo, or Mexican gray wolf, is the smallest, most genetically distinct, and one of the rarest subspecies of the gray wolf. These native southwestern wolves were listed under the Endangered Species Act in 1976 after being eradicated in the wild. Reintroduction efforts began in 1998, but conservation efforts have suffered without the implementation of recommended recovery actions.

For years, scientists have recommended to the Service that there be three subpopulations of at least 200 wolves each (with a minimum of 750 total), spread throughout the southwestern United States, including areas like the Grand Canyon Ecoregion and the Southern Rockies (Carroll et al. 2006; Wayne and Hedrick 2011; Carroll et al. 2014; Hendricks, et al. 2016). Scientists warn that this metapopulation structure and geographic distribution are imperative to the recovery of Mexican wolves. Unfortunately, we are still far short of this scientific recommendation.

Learn more at www.mexicanwolves.org.

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