

Mexican Wolf Blue Range Reintroduction Project Adaptive Management Oversight Committee

Concerns Expressed About Mexican Wolf Field Activities

The Directors from the 6 Lead Agencies (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Arizona Game and Fish Department, New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, USDA-Forest Service, USDA-Wildlife Services, White Mountain Apache Tribe) which comprise the Mexican Wolf Adaptive Management Oversight Committee (AMOC) for Mexican wolf reintroduction have heard several concerns and complaints expressed by the public regarding the field activities carried out by the Mexican Wolf Interagency Field Team (IFT). The Directors took these allegations seriously and directed (AMOC) to investigate these claims. Below are AMOC's responses to the Directors regarding some of the more common concerns that have been expressed.

- (1) **Comment:** The Interagency Field Team (IFT) does not investigate wolf kills of cattle. **Response:** All suspected or reported wolf depredations and wolf-human conflicts are investigated immediately and reported appropriately, in strict accordance with standard operating procedure (SOP) 11.0 (including reporting obligations). SOP 11.0 directs USDA Wildlife Services (WS) IFT members to respond within 24 hours to each incident or allegation of wolf-livestock conflict, and other IFT members will provide assistance as requested, appropriate and/or necessary. Even before finalization of SOP 11.0, the project's 5-year review found the average IFT response time to arrive on scene of a reported depredation was less than 24 hours. Non-WS IFT members, with assistance from WS IFT members as available and appropriate, handle wolf-human conflicts involving attacks on pets or domestic animals other than livestock, and other nuisance behavior as defined within SOP 13.0, Control of Mexican Wolves. Data compiled in September 2005 indicated that there had been 162 potential Mexican gray wolf depredation reports (unpublished data). Of the 162 investigation reports, 96 attribute the cause of death or injury to possible, probable or confirmed Mexican wolf depredation. Investigated reports using the best available evidence have also attributed deaths or injuries to accidents, lightning, noxious weeds, coyotes, black bears, mountain lions, feral dogs, hybrid animals (not Mexican wolf hybrids), birthing, and unknown.
- (2) **Comment:** The IFT does not report wolf kills of cattle. **Response:** There were 162 cattle/sheep/or goats found dead or injured from all causes (see above) according to depredation reports available at the IFT field office as of September 2005. The IFT found and reported 41% of these animals, while permittees and others reported 59% of the animals. Clearly, the IFT has reported and continues to report all depredations found from the air or the ground. The IFT has found and reported dead livestock consistently throughout the years, including 17 reported during 2005. The majority of permittees who have raised this as an issue have actually had dead livestock found and reported on their allotments by the IFT during the course of the project.
- (3) **Comment:** The IFT picks up cattle carcasses before ranchers can find the carcasses in order to hide evidence of wolf depredations. **Response:** Per SOP 11.0, all livestock carcasses that are found by the IFT are left in the area and are reported to the appropriate livestock operator.. The IFT reports the dead animal to the permittees via phone or often in person. The numbers above clearly do not support this claim and there is absolutely no evidence for the IFT hiding any carcasses that are found. In fact, the IFT works diligently towards finding remains of all prey items taken by Mexican wolves and reports them accordingly.

- (4) **Comment:** Mexican wolves are being fed constantly, and would not survive otherwise. **Response:** Guidelines for the extent and duration of supplemental feeding are provided within SOP 8.0. The IFT provides food (carnivore logs that contain no beef and in some cases carcasses of road-killed ungulates) to wolves following initial releases or translocations. This is generally done for 1-2 months following the release/translocation. In addition, the IFT does sometime feed wolves in association with control or trapping actions (e.g., 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 established in an area, they are not fed by the IFT and these packs must kill or scavenge prey sufficient to meet the pack's biological needs.
- (5) **Comment:** Mexican wolves are diseased, sickly looking animals. **Response:** Like most mammals, wolves shed hair during the late spring. The public sometimes reports wolves as being diseased, sickly, or skinny during this time frame and during the summer (when the hair is shed). 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 smaller than their northern counterparts, and a healthy adult Mexican gray wolf may weigh as little as 45 - 50 pounds.
- (6) **Comment:** Mexican wolves all originated from captive animals, and are therefore unafraid of humans and more likely to be aggressive or attack people. **Response:** One of the primary characteristics used for selecting Mexican wolves for reintroduction is avoidance and fear of humans. Potential release wolves must not be socialized or habituated to humans so they are not likely to be attracted to people or human establishments once released. Therefore, Mexican wolves selected for reintroduction are managed with minimal exposure to humans, in an environment that fosters and maintains natural wolf behaviors. Reintroduced wolves have immediately demonstrated their retention of wild behavior upon release, including killing of wild elk within 6 weeks of the first release of wolves. Although attacks by wolves on humans do occur, they are considered extremely rare in North America. Wolves, like any other animal, may occasionally develop some level of habituation to humans and human activity. However, observation of wolves in proximity to humans or man-made structures does not mean that wolves are likely to attack. The risk of wolf attacks across the world is very low, and the majority of wolf attacks that have occurred resulted from situations involving rabid wolves, wolves habituated to humans (such as being fed by humans at campgrounds or near settlements), or provoked wolves (e.g., wolves were beaten or attempted to be killed), and the attacks were attempts by the wolves to get away. There are no accounts of people having died as a result of attacks by free-ranging wolves from anywhere in the United States.
- (7) **Comment:** The animals that are present in the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area (BRWRA) are not true wolves, and are hybrids. **Response:** According to scientists, there are three pure

lineages of the Mexican gray wolf: McBride, Ghost Ranch, and Aragon. Geneticists have verified (certified) that all three lineages consist of pure-bred Mexican wolves. Regarding the free-ranging population, there have been two incidents of Mexican wolf-dog hybrid litters conceived in the wild (one in New Mexico, one on the Fort Apache Indian Reservation). Both litters were humanely euthanized after genetic testing verified they were Mexican wolf-dog crosses. Both cases involved a female Mexican wolf breeding with a male dog. Aside from the two hybrid litters that have been discovered, there is no evidence to date to suggest hybridization with dogs or other canids is occurring in the free-ranging Mexican wolf population. Genetic testing and analysis of all captured animals will continue to be an important component of the Mexican wolf reintroduction program. We will continue to investigate genetic data and determine if introgression of either domestic dog or coyote genes has occurred within the Mexican wolf population.

- (8) **Comment:** Mexican wolves can't kill elk. **Response:** Mexican wolves have been documented to be involved in the death of 101 elk, 5 deer, and 2 bighorn sheep through the course of the project. Although the Environmental Impact Statement suggested that deer would be the primary prey for Mexican wolves, it appears that wolves are principally killing and feeding upon elk. The first Mexican wolves were released in 1998 and successfully preyed upon elk within six weeks of release. Monitoring by the IFT and independent researchers has demonstrated that wolves prey upon all sex and age classes of elk, and therefore are fully capable of killing live elk when necessary.
- (9) **Comment:** The IFT shoots elk to feed the wolves. **Response:** Unequivocally, the IFT does not kill elk to feed wolves. Elk that die from other causes (primarily roadkill) may sometimes be salvaged for wolf food pursuant to SOP 9.0. Any elk that is killed without a license, or approval of the local game warden (if injured), is a violation of state game laws. Residents who discover an elk that they feel was killed as the result of illegal activities should report it to their local game warden/wildlife manager. The game warden/wildlife manager will follow up with an investigation. If any IFT member were involved they would suffer the same penalty as any other member of the public, and would be subject to additional disciplinary action by their agency, including termination.
- (10) **Comment:** Agency personnel have been untruthful and intentionally mislead people about wolf reintroduction. **Response:** Unequivocally, this is false. Agency field and administrative personnel report factual information to the public based on the best information available at the time it is provided. Management scenarios are subject to change as the information and behavior of the wolves change. The intent is to relay as accurate of information as what we currently have to the affected publics. All agency personnel will continue to report accurate information to the public. Anyone who has evidence to the contrary should submit it to AMOC or to the appropriate agency, with sufficient details to enable appropriate investigation.
- (11) **Comment:** Agency personnel do not report accurate or timely locations of the wolves.

Response: Concerns about timely flow of appropriate information were significant elements of agency and public comment during the 3-year review, and changes to SOPs and field staff capacity and direction were modified as a result. In 2005 the IFT has called residents or permittees 65 times on or the day after the flight, and e-mailed residents or permittees 425 times on the day or day after the flight. In addition, the IFT responded to all calls from local residents requesting information. These e-mails and calls consisted of locations relative to geographic areas on the landscape. The locations provided were intentionally vague during the denning season of wolves, and generally only described the distance from one map point instead of two during this time frame. The IFT is available for follow up calls or any phone call from the public regarding locations at 1-888-459-9653. Individuals have in some instances suggested that the location information should be given in a more timely fashion, or that the information was not accurate. We do not always agree with that perspective, but in such cases the IFT now works with the individuals to ensure that communication is improved. However, the IFT does not contact individuals who do not have wolves on or near their allotment or private land. Further, the IFT does not routinely give locations to individuals who do not request the information from the IFT. Permittees or private residents that request the information and have a demonstrable need (i.e., wolves on their allotment) for the information are routinely contacted. The IFT is consistently searching for improvements in the methodology and carefully considers requests. Currently, AMOC (with significant assistance from Greenlee County) is continuing to explore alternatives and will address the issue in the 5-year review recommendations, if not before, to adjust its procedures pertaining to flow and detail of wolf location information.

- (12) **Comment:** Mexican wolves were supposed to remain at initial release sites and within boundaries wilderness areas, according to information previously provided by reintroduction project personnel. **Response:** Throughout the period when reintroduction was first discussed with the public, agency representatives spoke consistently and forthrightly about the likelihood that if wolves were reintroduced, some would likely localize and others might travel hundreds of miles. Mexican wolf packs range over large areas (on average about 182 mi²) and individual wolves can disperse hundreds of miles. As predicted, some wolves have established home ranges in areas in which they were released, while others have moved into other areas to establish a home range. This information was well known about wolves prior to the reintroduction of Mexican wolves in the BRWRA. No promises were ever made that that wolves would somehow be restricted to local areas of the BRWRA. Wolves are allowed to exist anywhere within this boundary. We are, however, required to capture packs that establish territories wholly outside the BRWRA per the Final Rule (63 FR 1752). The fact that these rules were established suggests that both the public and the agencies were keenly aware that wolves would cover large areas.