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For Release: July 18, 2008

Thousands Contribute Comments and Recommendations on Mexican Wolf Reintroduction

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has sorted through the 13,598 comments it received in response to the agency's call for public input on potential modifications to its rule that established the Mexican wolf reintroduction project. The Service announced in 2006 it would continue reintroducing wolves into native habitat in New Mexico and Arizona and would modify the rule to address lessons learned over a decade of reintroducing wolves. The Service began reintroducing Mexican wolves as a "nonessential experimental population" in 1998.

In the comments, people tended to either strongly support or strenuously object to reintroducing the wolf into the wild, which is not the issue at hand. The issue is how best to pursue reintroduction, thus recovery, in terms of a modified rule. Many submitted detailed comments on how to improve or modify aspects of the reintroduction project. Comments were grouped into 26 themes ranging from geographical boundaries to compensation for depredated cattle to social and economic impacts of the project.

The analytical summary and a sampling of the comments are available on the Internet at www.fws.gov/southwest/es/mexicanwolf/ (click on the rule modification button). Copies are also available by calling the Service at 505-761-4782.

"The issues raised will be used to frame a range of alternatives for modifying the Mexican Wolf Reintroduction Project," said John Slown, biologist overseeing the rule-modification process. "We thank everyone for sending comments. Your involvement will assist us in preparing a thorough set of alternative management options."

"Rulemaking" is the process by which federal agencies promulgate regulations to implement decisions. Scoping helps to define the issues early in the process that the agency should examine during their rule-modification procedure. The federal rulemaking process can take several years. "We are early in the process, and we will ask for public input several more times before final decisions are made," said Slown.

A draft rule and environmental impact statement will be prepared for public. The environmental impact statement helps the agency consider the environmental aspects of their decisions. The public is directly involved at several stages of the decision-making process. Once all comment periods close, the Service takes the comments into consideration, finalizes the rule and the environmental impact statement and implements the decision.

The scoping process highlighted some misperceptions about wolves and reintroduction.

Comments showed that some people remain concerned the Mexican wolves released into the wild are wolf-dog hybrids and not pure, endangered Mexican wolves. The charge probably stems from two lineages of Mexican wolf named "Aragon" and "Ghost Ranch" that were found late among the captive population. Before certifying the Aragon and Ghost Ranch lineages to be genetically pure Mexican wolves, the Service tested genetic material from these animals. In each of several tests, the animals demonstrated pure Mexican wolf genetics, distinct from domestic dog or northern gray wolf genetic characteristics.

Although wolf/dog hybrids do exist, these are primarily captive animals bred for the pet trade. However, in separate cases, two female Mexican wolves were bred by domestic dogs in the wild in Arizona or New Mexico. Both times the hybrid offspring were identified, captured and humanely euthanized, per the rule governing management of the reintroduced population. The Service is committed to keeping the introduced population of Mexican wolves genetically pure.

Another fear expressed in the comments is that Mexican wolves released into the wild are "habituated" to human presence, due to being raised in captivity and thus exhibit a variety of undesirable traits such as lack of fear of humans, tendency to seek food sources at or near human dwellings, etc. Since there were no Mexican wolves in the wild when the project began, the only wolves initially available for release were captive-bred and reared. The Service continues to use captive reared wolves to augment natural reproduction, but every effort is made to limit human interaction with the wolves scheduled to be placed in the wild. Scheduled feedings occur only once or twice a week. There is no contact when the staff leaves food. The wolves are afraid of staff and typically run to the far end of their one-acre enclosure and pace, or hide under brush or in artificial dens when humans are near. Any necessary wolf observation by the Service is done from blinds using telescopes to reduce contact. Also, required veterinary care usually elicits a fear or discomfort response from the wolves. In rare cases some wolves in the captive population have shown a lack of normal fear of humans. Such "bold" wolves are not released into the wild.

Wolves in the wild that exhibit patterns of habituation, such as getting too close to human dwellings, are hazed by project staff using rubber bullets, crackers shells (exploding shells that are fired into the air over the wolf to frighten the animal with their loud reports) or other means. Repeated habituated behavior results in a wolf being designated a "nuisance wolf;" and as such it may be translocated to an area distant from the location of the habituated behavior or removed from the wild. It is important to note that failure on the part of a wolf to immediately flee from a human presence upon a chance encounter with humans in the wild is not necessarily a sign of habituation. Wolves are curious animals and will sometimes observe humans from a distance out of curiosity.

The reintroduction of the Mexican wolf is a cooperative, multi-agency effort of the Arizona Game and Fish Department, New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, White Mountain Apache Tribe, USDA Forest Service, USDA-APHIS Wildlife Services and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. We are both a leader and trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation, known for our scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, dedicated professionals and commitment to public service. For information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit ww.fws.gov.