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Feds move ahead with Mexican wolf releases



A Mexican gray wolf leaves cover at the Seviellta National Wildlife Refuge, north of Socorro. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service file photo



By Uriel J. Garcia

The New Mexican | Updated 8 hours ago

In a direct snub to state officials, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced Wednesday that it will release about 10 Mexican gray wolves into the wilds of southwestern New Mexico, even though state game officials have refused to issue a permit for the action.

The federal agency issued a statement Wednesday that said it will release the wolves as part of its recovery program for a species that is at risk of extinction.

“It is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s obligation under the law to recover this species, and reintroductions into the wild from the more genetically diverse captive population are an essential part of that recovery process,” the statement said.

Fish and Wildlife said it notified New Mexico Game and Fish Department Director Alexandra Sandoval, who previously denied a permit for the release. Despite protests from dozens of environmental groups, the seven-member State Game Commission late last month unanimously rejected the federal government’s appeal of her decision.

Wednesday’s statement said the U.S. Department of the Interior is exempting the Mexican Wolf Recovery Program from a policy of complying with state permit requirements in New Mexico. The announcement added that the Fish and Wildlife Service prefers to work with the state in its efforts to rescue endangered species and hopes it can do so with other programs.

The federal government’s decision to ignore Sandoval and release the wolves onto National Forest Service land is the latest in an ongoing fight between the Fish and Wildlife Service under President Barack Obama’s administration and the Game and Fish Department under the administration of Gov. Susana Martinez.

In June, Sandoval refused to issue a permit for the Mexican wolf program, saying the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service lacked a detailed plan to release up to 10 captive Mexican wolves in the Gila National Forest. Sandoval said that left her without enough information on what effects the predators would have on elk and deer populations. The federal agency disputes her characterization, saying it has released the wolves into the wild in the past.

At the Sept. 29 meeting at which the State Game Commission unanimously rejected the federal government’s appeal of the permit denial, dozens of protesters voiced their frustration at the commissioners, who are appointed by the Republican governor. “No surprise! Shameful!” audience members said as the vote was announced.

Paul Kienzle of Albuquerque, chairman of the commission, has expressed concerns about wolves coexisting with people and livestock. He has referenced one wolf that was shot and killed, saying “that was a problem animal that was ultimately put down.”

But advocates say the commissioners gave in to the agricultural industry’s interests. Ranchers have said the predators threaten their livestock and their safety.

Kienzle and a spokesman for Game and Fish didn’t immediately return after-hours messages from *The New Mexican* seeking comment.

Small numbers of captive Mexican gray wolves have been placed in the wild since 1998. They

are the most endangered subspecies of wolf, with a population of 109 in the wilderness of two states, New Mexico and Arizona.

Michael Robinson of the Center for Biological Diversity, an advocacy group, applauded the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s decision to continue with its efforts regardless of the state’s opposition.

“Releasing Mexican wolves to the wild is the only way to save these animals from extinction,” he said. “It’s vital now that enough wolves get released to diversify their gene pool and ensure they don’t waste away from inbreeding.”

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