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Contacts: John Bradley, (505) 248-6279, john_bradley@fws.gov
Nathan Gonzalez, (623) 236-7230, ngonzalez@azgfd.gov

2017 U.S. Mexican Wolf Population Survey Completed

ALBUQUERQUE – The Mexican wolf Interagency Field Team (IFT) completed the annual yearend population survey, documenting a minimum of 114 Mexican wolves in the wild in Arizona and New Mexico at the end of 2017. This number includes 26 pups that survived to the end of 2017, accounting for a slight increase over the estimated 113 wild wolves in 2016.

The lack of stronger population growth appears primarily due to lower pup survival than in 2016. There were a total of 50 surviving pups born in the wild in 2016.

“The Service and our partners remain focused on and committed to genetically healthy and robust Mexican wolf population and to its full recovery,” said U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Southwest Regional Director Amy Lueders. “We all understand the challenges involved in protecting and restoring wild populations of this endangered species, and we look forward to continuing our work with diverse state and local partners in Arizona and New Mexico.”

The survey results come from on-the-ground population data collected by the IFT from November 2017 through January 2018, as well as from aerial surveys conducted in January and February of this year.

“While the 2017 numbers are not what we were hoping for, this is not the sole metric to measure progress in Mexican wolf recovery. The fact that cross-fostered wolves had pups this year is a major milestone and presents a mechanism to better manage genetics,” said Jim deVos, Assistant Director of Wildlife Management for the Arizona Game and Fish Department. “Also encouraging is the substantial increase in the number of Mexican wolves that were equipped with monitoring collars that will greatly increase the management information that the IFT collects.”

deVos also pointed to the progress made by the program in just two decades. “While 1998 seems like a long time ago, it is important to remember that there were no Mexican wolves in the wild just a few years ago, and yet today there are healthy, stable and increasing populations, marking progress toward recovery.”

The results from the aerial survey, coupled with the ground survey conducted by the IFT, confirmed:

! There are a total of 22 packs, with a minimum of 51 wolves in New Mexico and 63 wolves in Arizona.

! One of four wolf pups cross-fostered in 2017 is confirmed to be alive and is radio collared.

! Twenty-four wolves were captured and radio-collared, including ten wolves that had not been captured previously.

In April and May of 2017, the IFT successfully cross-fostered four genetically diverse pups from the captive breeding program into similarly aged litters of established packs in the wild. Cross-fostering was first implemented in 2014, when a male pup and female pup were placed in the Dark Canyon pack's den in New Mexico. The female successfully bred in 2016, and through genetic analysis, we confirmed that the male produced at least one pup in 2017.

In 2017, there were a total of 12 documented wolf mortalities and ten wolves that were removed from the wild population. This number includes two wolves that were translocated back into the wild population and four pups that were taken into captivity during cross-fostering.

The Mexican wolf is the rarest subspecies of gray wolf in North America. Once common throughout portions of the southwestern United States and Mexico, it was all but eliminated from the wild by the 1970s. In 1977, the Service initiated efforts to conserve the species by developing a bi-national captive breeding program with seven Mexican wolves. Approximately 280 Mexican wolves are currently maintained in over 50 facilities throughout the United States and Mexico. In 1998, Mexican wolves were released to the wild for the first time in Arizona and New Mexico within the Mexican Wolf Experimental Population Area. In 2011, Mexican wolves were released to the wild in the Sierra Madre Occidental in Mexico. There are approximately 30 Mexican wolves in the wild in Mexico.

In November 2017, the Service completed the Mexican Wolf Recovery Plan, First Revision. The recovery plan uses the best available science to chart a path forward for the Mexican wolf that can be accommodated within the species' historical range in the Southwestern United States and Mexico. This revised plan provides measurable and objective criteria for successful recovery which, when met, will enable the Service to remove the Mexican wolf from the list of endangered species and turn its management over to the appropriate states and tribes after delisting.

Partners in Mexican wolf recovery include the Service, Mexican government, Arizona Game and Fish Department, White Mountain Apache Tribe, U.S. Forest Service, USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service –Wildlife Services, several participating counties, and the Mexican Wolf Species Survival Plan.

For more information on the Mexican Wolf Reintroduction Program, visit <http://www.fws.gov/southwest/es/mexicanwolf> or www.azgfd.gov/wolf.