

# **Mexican Wolf Blue Range Reintroduction Project Adaptive Management Oversight Committee Standard Operating Procedure**

**Title:** Wolf Translocations

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**Purpose:** This SOP describes the processes for proposing and approving translocations of Mexican wolves on lands other than the Fort Apache Indian Reservation (the San Carlos Indian Reservation is not an authorized translocation area). It supersedes relevant sections of the 1998 Mexican Wolf Interagency Management Plan (USFWS 1998), and therefore represents, in part, the “Service Approved Management Plan” referenced in the Mexican Wolf Final Rule (50 CFR 17.84(k)).

**Exceptions:** Approved exceptions to this SOP include:

1. When necessary for management purposes (e.g. to relocate a problem wolf, compensate for a wolf mortality, or enhance genetics among free-ranging wolves), the IFT may make a translocation to any location on non-tribal lands within five miles of:
  - a. An area that was previously approved for an initial release (see SOP 5.0) or translocation; or
  - b. An area that is currently occupied by an established pack or elements of an established pack; or
  - c. An area that is vacant but which was previously occupied by an established pack.
  - d. Note: Such translocations must be conducted in accordance with Procedure 6 of this SOP.
2. Translocations may also be made onto any tribal lands with advance concurrence from the appropriate tribal authority. Translocations of wolves on the Fort Apache Indian Reservation are subject to decision-making processes and approval of the White Mountain Apache Tribe. The San Carlos Indian Reservation is not an authorized translocation area.
3. Note: Based on precedence established by the USFWS Region 2 (Southwest) Director in 2004, release of pups of less than one year of age that have been born in captivity to a captured female that was impregnated in the wild and which is re-released to the wild with her pups is also considered translocation, rather than initial release.

Per SOP 2.0, AMOC must approve any additional exceptions to this SOP, with concurrence from the Director of the state wildlife Lead Agency responsible for the proposed translocation.

**Background:** Translocations move wolves from one location in the wild to another, whether directly or with an intermediate stay in captivity, and are typically responses to management issues that need immediate attention. Pursuant to the Mexican Wolf Final Rule (50 CFR 18.84(k)), translocation can be used to move wolves to any location within the BRWRA. Translocation of wolves is a management action that provides an additional management option to quickly respond to conflict situations, which otherwise might result in the death of livestock

and/or wolves, or the recapture and return to captivity of wolves. Translocation can benefit both wolves and human activities by limiting conflicts with people and livestock, avoiding wolf losses, and facilitating recovery by aiding in dispersal of wolves into suitable locations throughout the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area (BRWRA). Some of the most likely reasons for translocating wolves include: conflicts with livestock or other domestic animals; dispersal of wolves into inappropriate areas or outside the BRWRA; replacement of a lost mate; or genetic management of the wild population. Translocations are essential to Mexican wolf management and recovery. Wolves that have previous experience in the wild with hunting, maintaining a home range, and successful denning and raising of pups have considerable value to the Mexican wolf Recovery Program. Data from the Mexican wolf reintroduction project to date indicate that the amount of time a wolf spends in the wild is directly related to their eventual success (success being defined as a wolf that breeds and raises pups in the wild). This is in contradiction to initially released wolves (i.e. naive captive born and raised wolves with no wild experience), which the data suggest are less successful and are more prone to human nuisance situations, elevated mortality due to naiveté, and are less effective at killing native prey. The data also indicate wolves that have been captured because of depredations and subsequently translocated to another area are not necessarily more prone to depredate again, and in fact, have gone on to contribute toward recovery. Each translocation requires substantial coordination among, and input from AMOC, the IFT, AMWG Cooperators, other stakeholders, and the public. However, advance planning can identify and approve locations to use when necessary, thus shortening the time and complexity involved in translocations.

Note: To facilitate monitoring and management, prior to translocation, adult-sized Mexican wolves will receive permanent identification marks and functioning radio-collars (recaptured wolves may already have both), unless enough animals from their family group are already radio-collared. If an animal is not large enough to wear a collar when it is translocated, reasonable effort shall be made to re-capture it for collaring when it reaches an appropriate size.

### **Procedures:**

1. Translocation site proposal and approval. Note: The AMOC goal is to select release areas that are biologically and legally appropriate, and which represent the best opportunity for successful translocation without inappropriate impacts on human activities, other land uses, and other species of wildlife, and to minimize likelihood of movement beyond the BRWRA.
  - a. Preferably, proposals will be developed for suites of sites sufficient to meet Project needs for an entire calendar year, or longer.
  - b. The Field Projects Coordinator, with assistance from the IFT Leaders, shall plan and coordinate development of proposals, with written description of relevant material for each of the factors or considerations noted below, and any others deemed relevant by the IFT or AMOC.
  - c. The IFT Leaders, in collaboration with the Field Projects Coordinator, shall assign one or more IFT members to draft each proposal.
  - d. The IFT, acting through the Field Projects Coordinator, shall discuss with AMOC each proposal early in its development, to ensure initial awareness as to concept and strategy.
  - e. Each proposal shall be fully discussed and vetted within the IFT as it is drafted. Every effort shall be made within the IFT to reach consensus on each element of the proposal.

- f. The IFT, acting through the Field Projects Coordinator, shall submit the written draft proposal to AMOC for Lead Agency review.
  - g. AMOC shall provide comment to the Field Projects Coordinator to indicate concurrence, suggestions or requests for revision, and/or disagreement with the proposal. Every effort shall be made within AMOC to reach consensus on each element of the proposal, before providing comment to the IFT.
  - h. The Field Projects Coordinator shall coordinate IFT consideration of AMOC comment, and appropriate revision of the proposal.
  - i. When AMOC is satisfied with the draft, the proposal shall be (in the following order):
    - i. Discussed with the Cooperators in an AMOC meeting; and
    - ii. Discussed in the annual (January-February) AMWG “release/translocation” public meeting, which shall alternate between Arizona and New Mexico.
  - j. The state wildlife Lead Agency for the state in which a proposed translocation site occurs may opt to hold additional public meetings to discuss the proposal.
    - i. The public meeting(s) shall be as close as possible to the area of the proposed translocation site (if multiple translocation sites are involved, multiple meetings may be held, or one meeting may be held in a reasonably central location);
    - ii. The County in which a public meeting will be held shall be asked to convene and facilitate the meeting; and
    - iii. The IFT member presenting the proposal at the public meeting shall provide AMOC with a written summary of public comment from the meeting.
  - k. The IFT shall then:
    - i. Ensure compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act, and applicable site permitting processes, by vetting the proposal with the U.S.D.A. Forest Service (USFS) District Ranger and other USFS staff responsible for the proposed site; and
    - ii. Discuss the proposal with each local permittee within five miles of the proposed site.
  - l. AMOC and the IFT shall then collaborate to modify the proposal as appropriate to address the comment received during the public review process outlined above.
  - m. If/when AMOC concurs that the proposal is acceptable, the state wildlife Lead Agency representative responsible for the proposed translocation shall submit the proposal, and relevant background information, such as dissenting Lead Agency or Cooperator opinion, to their Director.
  - n. The state wildlife Lead Agency Director shall approve or reject the proposal, and their AMOC representative shall then inform AMOC and the IFT of the decision.
  - o. The AMOC Chair shall then inform AMWG Cooperators of the decision.
  - p. The Lead Agency public information officers shall then inform the public of the decision (see Step 6, below).
  - q. The proposal and documentation of the decision on it shall be filed in the IFT office, and available to the public on request.
2. The following information shall be considered in determining whether to translocate a wolf:
    - a. Previous behavior of the wolf. Carefully evaluate the reasons for considering translocation. If a problem or nuisance animal is involved, evaluate whether such behavior might be likely at the new location.

- b. Genetic and reproductive importance of the wolf
  - c. Physical condition of the wolf, including but not restricted to reproductive cycle
  - d. Site conditions at the time of translocation:
    - i. Weather and snow cover
    - ii. Presence and vulnerability of native prey
    - iii. Presence of livestock
    - iv. Hunting seasons
    - v. Recreational and other uses
3. Release methods
- a. Soft release – Use of a pen designed to hold wolves up to several months to acclimate them to a specific area. Such pens are typically chain link or soft plastic, and they are constructed with (as appropriate) electrified or non-electrified mesh.
  - b. Hard release – Direct release of a wolf or wolves into the wild, as in direct release from crates into the wild or into a fladry enclosure constructed of rope with attached flagging.
4. Translocation area criteria
- a. Translocation sites must be:
    - i. Five or more miles from a town
    - ii. Three or more miles from a dwelling occupied year-round
    - iii. Three or more miles from Recovery Area boundaries
    - iv. In areas of adequate prey abundance (e.g. elk, deer, and other native ungulates), based on the best available information from the appropriate state or tribal wildlife agency
  - b. All translocation site evaluations shall also consider and address:
    - i. Previous use of site (if any), and outcomes from such use.
    - ii. Presence of wolves – a translocation site shall not be used when it is within five miles of a den site that is occupied by a pack of wolves.
    - iii. Presence of humans – all human presence within five miles of the translocation site shall be evaluated.
    - iv. Presence of livestock – all livestock use within five miles of the translocation site shall be evaluated; all translocation sites should be as far away as possible from active livestock operations.
    - v. Recreational uses in the area (including permitted guide and outfitter activities) – avoid conflicts when possible.
    - vi. Access to the area and security of the location – consider how much public use occurs (translocation pens should be safe from human intrusion), but also consider the ease of logistical (management) access by the IFT.
    - vii. Habitat and site topography.
    - viii. Availability of water – year-round access to water within two miles of the translocation site is preferred, but water is not a decision criterion.
    - ix. Expected need for supplemental feeding and monitoring (see SOP 8.0).
    - x. Expected need for temporary area closures – proposals may recommend closure of areas within one mile of where a translocation pen would be built, for protection of wolves that will be temporarily restrained in the pen and which might use the pen area immediately post-translocation (see SOP 7.0). Whenever

possible, travel on trails and roads shall be allowed, but travel off trail or road may be prohibited. If a wolf pack is suspected to have pups, a closure to prohibit dogs along open trails may also be recommended to prevent conflicts. In any case, closures should be proposed for as small an area as possible and for as brief a period as possible, and structured to address the specific circumstances for each site/area.

5. If an approved translocation site on USFS lands requires a temporary closure, the IFT shall comply with SOP 7.0: Temporary Closures.
6. Public outreach for authorized translocations.
  - a. The IFT shall notify AMOC, local permittees (i.e. those within five miles of the proposed translocation), local county officials, and local District Rangers as soon as the need for translocation is identified and before the translocation occurs.
  - b. The Lead Agencies shall collaborate in issuing a general news release, with copies to the county government of the county in which the translocation will occur within seven calendar days following each translocation.

#### **Approvals:**

The Mexican Wolf Blue Range Reintroduction Project Adaptive Management Oversight Committee approved this SOP on November 24, 2004.

#### **References:**

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 1998. 1998 Mexican Wolf Interagency Management Plan. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Albuquerque, New Mexico.