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Arizona Game and Fish Department

NEWS RELEASE

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Arizona wolf numbers are up

Arizona Game and Fish Department conducts 2011 population surveys in state for multi-agency Mexican wolf program

PHOENIX – The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), Arizona Game and Fish Department and other partners in the Mexican Wolf Reintroduction Project announced earlier today that the endangered Mexican wolf population count increased to a minimum of 58 wolves compared to last year's count of 50.

The increase is encouraging news for the multi-agency program, especially considering that the state's largest wildfire, the Wallow, burned through three packs' denning areas within weeks of pups being born.

The wolf project stimulates high public interest, and the public often asks Game and Fish how wolf population surveys are conducted and what the department's role in the project is.

The Arizona Game and Fish Department dedicates five staff to the Interagency Field Team (IFT), the multi-agency group that oversees on-the-ground wolf conservation activities. Game and Fish's IFT staff are responsible for the day-to-day management of wolves; coordinating and conducting the annual population counts; and, any helicopter-associated wolf captures in Arizona on public lands and on the Fort Apache Indian Reservation.

In addition, the department provides pilots and fixed-wing planes to assist in locating wolves via telemetry signals prior to the helicopter counts and any capture efforts throughout the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area (BRWRA), which encompasses parts of Arizona and New Mexico. This year the department conducted the surveys in Arizona, while FWS conducted them in New Mexico.

Other specially-trained Game and Fish personnel that are not part of the IFT assist with capture operations in Arizona to ensure darting and net-gunning activities are conducted in the safest and most proficient manner possible.

Even before aerial operations begin, Game and Fish's IFT staff are involved in estimating the number of uncollared wolves present in Arizona. They begin surveying for uncollared wolves months earlier through howling surveys, track surveys, use of trail cameras and other methods. They also contact stakeholders, such as landowners and grazing permittees, in the wolf reintroduction area to advise them of upcoming surveys and collect any wolf activity information from them.

"Developing partnerships with these critical stakeholders and implementing proactive management efforts to reduce wolf-livestock interactions on public and private lands is, we believe, the key to the long-term survival of the wolves in the Southwest," said Director Larry Voyles of the Arizona Game and Fish Department. "Building public tolerance by those who live

on the land and must coexist with the wolf is crucial to the success of the Mexican wolf program in Arizona.

“Every biologist who works on an endangered species repatriation project prays for the day that wild-born progeny are on the ground,” said Voyles. “The IFT estimates that more than 90 percent of the collared wolves on the ground today in Arizona were born in the wild. Further, we have at least an 18 percent increase in total numbers and a 150 percent increase in breeding pairs over 2010 numbers.

“Even though these numbers are below the target levels of the recovery plan, these elements exhibit a cornerstone achievement in Mexican wolf conservation,” continued Voyles, “and this year’s count gives credence to the fact that we are moving in a positive direction.”

The IFT estimates the Mexican wolf population at a minimum count level because it is impossible to find and verify every uncollared animal that may exist in the wild. However, the 2011 population count is considered one of the most inclusive because the IFT trapped and collared 16 wolves this fall, allowing biologists to more accurately track and estimate the population than in years when fewer animals were collared.

Population survey and management activities conducted by Game and Fish’s IFT staff are funded by contracts and grants from FWS; no sportsmen-generated funds are used for these count efforts.

The project’s other cooperative partners include FWS, White Mountain Apache Tribe, USDA Forest Service, USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service – Wildlife Services, and Graham, Greenlee and Navajo Counties.

For more information on the Mexican wolf in Arizona, visit www.azgfd.gov/wolf.

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