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NEWS RELEASE

For immediate release
July 26, 2004

New wolf pack placed in Arizona

PINETOP, Ariz. -- A new pack of five Mexican wolves was placed in a temporary enclosure at a remote site in the Blue Range Primitive Area, east of Hannagan Meadow, on the weekend of July 24. The Aspen Pack, will augment the existing wild wolf population in Arizona and New Mexico, further diversify the population's genetics, and help offset recent losses of wolves, say Arizona Game and Fish Department officials.

The pack, consisting of an alpha male and female and their three pups, will stay in a nylon mesh, low-impact acclimation pen for up to two weeks. If they have not self-released by then, they will be freed.

"The site was selected because of an excellent prey base, relative isolation from human residences, seasonal absence of livestock, and presence of permanent water," says Paul Overy, the department's wolf project field team leader.

The pen site, about 18 miles south of Alpine, is within the KP Fire area closure, established by the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests. Public access is currently closed to the Blue Range between Highway 191 and the Blue River, and from Red Hill Road south past Raspberry Trail.

The pups weigh approximately 35 pounds. Supplementary food sources, such as highway mortalities of elk and deer, will be provided for a short period after release, but previously released wolves did not use food caches significantly.

"The Aspen Pack release is part of an interagency program begun in 1998 to reintroduce Mexican wolves to a portion of their historic habitat in southwestern New Mexico and east-central Arizona," says Overy.

Overy says the project is progressing well. "Existing packs are doing well, and new packs are forming. We estimate there are about 50 wolves in the wild in Arizona and New Mexico. With the birth of the first wild-born litter from a wild-born parent, in 2002, the reintroduction project evolved into a new phase whereby today, for the most part, natural reproduction is replacing reintroduction from captive populations."

Overy noted that the new release site, and three alternatives that were not selected, was discussed with the public before the Forest Service approved the final site-selection decision. In addition, the Field Team has made special efforts to ensure that local residents are aware of the planned release.

Terry B. Johnson, endangered species chief for the department and chair of the interagency adaptive management effort, commented, "Wolf deaths last year made this release necessary. Some of those losses were inevitable, such as transient wolves being hit by cars, but some were also unlawfully killed. We are replacing some of those lost animals in order to aggressively pursue the project's population objectives and move toward recovery and delisting."

The department has been actively involved in Mexican wolf recovery efforts since the mid-1980s. In 1998, in cooperation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 11 wolves were released into the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area in eastern Arizona. In subsequent years, additional releases have occurred. Management activities have included public opinion surveys, public outreach and education, site feasibility studies, surveys along the Mexican border for naturally occurring wolves, intensive coordination with other cooperating agencies, and adaptive management with the public.

The reintroduction of the Mexican gray 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, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Forest Service, and USDA Wildlife Services.

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