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US to step up control of wolf recovery program

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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is retaking stronger control over the controversial Mexican gray wolf recovery effort in Eastern Arizona and western New Mexico.

The service settled a lawsuit by environmental groups by agreeing to scrap the system under which the wolf reintroduction program has been operating for about six years.

In response, the environmental groups and cattle-ranching interests on opposing sides of the controversial program are each hoping this means their side will have a better chance of prevailing in the long run.

Mexican gray wolves were introduced to an area in the White Mountains in 1998, and since 2003 a multi-agency group called the Adaptive Management Oversight Committee has managed the project, led by Terry Johnson, the endangered species coordinator for Arizona Game and Fish. But conflict has broken out, largely between environmental and ranching interests over the problem of what to do with wolves that eat cattle.

In April 2005, that committee established a protocol, known as SOP 13, for deciding when a wolf needed to be removed by capturing or killing it. In essence, the policy boiled down to "three strikes and you're out" — that is, if a wolf eats three or more cattle within a 365-day period, it was to be removed.

Environmental groups argued that wolves were being removed too readily, without enough concern for individual circumstances, under the plan. In a lawsuit filed last May and in subsequent legal complaints, they argued the Fish and Wildlife Service must eliminate the committee and SOP 13 and take over more direct control of the wolf program.

In the settlement filed Friday, the sides agree to this concept: "The Service recognizes that the AMOC does not oversee the actions of the Service and that the AMOC has no decision-making authority over the Service with regard to the Service's management of the Mexican Wolf Recovery Program or the Mexican Wolf Reintroduction Project."

Michael Robinson of the Tucson-based Center for Biological Diversity, one of the plaintiffs, called it "extraordinarily good news that FWS no longer has to follow a punitive and rigid formula."

But he said he's concerned that the service will be under pressure from the livestock industry to remove as many wolves as possible.

Laura Schneberger of the Gila Livestock Growers Association said in a written statement that she hopes the settlement means the service will become stricter in its handling of problem wolves.

"It is our hope that the Fish and Wildlife Service will comply with the original recovery rule that requires removal of wolves that are defined as problem wolves under that rule. Failure to follow the rule has allowed problem wolf behavior to become pack behavior under SOP 13 management," she wrote.

Arizona Game and Fish and the Fish and Wildlife Service said the service had never given up as much control as the environmental groups argued, retaining a final say in wolf management decisions.

Said service spokesman Tom Buckley: "We will continue to examine on a case-by-case basis depredations (of cattle) and decide whether the wolf needs to be removed."

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