"BAD WOLF! Now go to your room"

Mexican wolves dine out on the ranches of New Mexico and Arizona. By Laura Schneberger

For the past seven years the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service's Mexican wolf team has diligently labored away at the task of recovering 100 Mexican wolves to the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area (BRWRA). Depending on which window you look out of, the project, located in southeast Arizona and southwest New Mexico, has been either a raging success or a dismal failure.

Unfortunately, there are three windows viewing the Mexican wolf program. One belongs to the federal agency behind the program; one to the ranchers who are unwillingly paying the feed bill; and one to wolf advocates who steadfastly refuse to allow any changes that would protect ranchers from wolves.

The most important thing that any rancher should understand about wolf reintroduction is that the federal employees who carry it out are intimidated by the environmental community and do just about everything in their power to avoid being sued by them. This fear is apparent in the day-to-day decision making that often goes on behind closed agency doors.

The latest bizarre policy to come out of the Mexican wolf program is the agency decision to allow wolves to kill a certain amount of livestock, then temporarily remove them to captivity as punishment. Known as the "three strikes" rule, it has left Southwest ranchers high and dry. While most major policy changes undergo some public scrutiny before implementation, the three-strikes policy did not. It simply appeared one day about two years ago and seems to be adaptable as the depredation situation changes.

It goes something like this: three confirmed cattle kills in a one-year period are grounds for removal from the wild for a year. After that year is up, the same wolf or wolves can be rereleased with a clean slate to kill three more confirmed cows or calves. If only two confirmed kills happen in a year, the wolf starts over with a clean slate on Jan. 1. This policy doesn't include any of the unconfirmed or probable kills or injuries caused by wolves that do not meet FWS standards of a confirmed kill.

The policy was a drastic change from the BRWRA's final environmental impact statement (EIS) and final rule's intent, which required removal of livestock killers, plain and simple. The intent of the rule has been manipulated over the years to meet the needs of the program.

Arizona ranchers Gary and Darcy Ely are old hands at dealing with wolf kills and weren't surprised when two Aspen Pack yearlings had a go at their pregnant heifers in February 2005. The entire Aspen Pack had been wreaking havoc all along the community of Blue, Ariz., all winter—at one point even hanging around and watching the school. The Elys found one calf leg and two mauled and mangled first-calf heifers. One was so badly injured in the rear end that she had to be destroyed.

Both attacks seemed to have happened while the heifers were giving birth and in an extremely vulnerable state. The resulting confirmation procedure was so gory even FWS had to admit the two young wolves needed to be removed from the area. According to Darcy Ely, the agency wouldn't call two maimed cows and one calf leg three incidents. More distressing, they even refused to call attacks on each heifer separate incidents, instead referring to them as a single incident. Darcy wasn't sure why this determination was made, but she has learned that when dealing with the wolf den, as it is known in Arizona, it is best to remember the old saying: "If it don't seem like it's worth the effort, it probably ain't."

The answer was forthcoming. The handling of the facts surrounding the attacks on the Elys' heifers allowed the same wolves to be rereleased two months later only 30 miles from the Elys' ranch. The wolves immediately returned and killed more Ely calves. One kill was eventually confirmed and hazing by the Aspen yearlings commenced again.

Soon afterwards the two wolves split up.

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Not even shy about having a picture taken, this wolf openly stalks cattle in the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area in Arizona and New Mexico. When three kills are confirmed, the wolf might be sent away for a year, then let loose to kill again.

The remains of the calf above would likely qualify as a "confirmed" kill, but now the wolf has to be identified. Meanwhile, the unknown wolf is free to roam and kill at random.

One was recently found shot to death with wool in its mouth near a dead sheep. The other has simply disappeared.

While the presumed murder of this wolf was considered by wolf advocates to be a sad blow to the program, the sheep was finally considered the third officially confirmed livestock depredation incident attributed to at least one of the wolves. Had the wolf not been shot, FWS would have had to decide whether to place a kill order on the animal or trap it. Under the flexible new policy, they would have had the option of keeping the trapped wolf in captivity for one year before rereleasing it into the recovery area.

Far-fetched as it may sound, rerelease of stock-killing Mexican wolves has become the agency's *modus operandi,* necessary to keep collared wolves in the wild long enough to show there is some progress in improving wolf numbers on the ground.

While federal agency personnel seem to be creating problems, they are also asking for a bigger budget to deal with those problems. They continue to receive paychecks and drive new pickups while ranchers pay high costs in time spent wrangling wolves, stress on their cattle and families, and income lost to "unconfirmed" depredation. The burden of problem-wolf management and dead-livestock exams falls on employees of the more rancher-friendly Wildlife Services (WS). This agency is experiencing greater budget shortfalls at a time when more personnel are needed to cope with the rising wolf problems. The situation has the ranching communities in Blue, Ariz., and Reserve, N.M, hopping mad.

PHOTOS SHERRI HAUGHT

This cow was merely run to death, so it only counts as a "probable." There appear to be degrees of death, but no one told these animals.

Catron County ranchers also have a hard time with the way feds count to three. On the Negritude Creek and Trackman ranches, the Francisco Pack had been killing calves and cows on and off for a couple of years. The pack ratcheted up the killing in the early spring of '05. In an attempt to stop those killings, the wolf team hazed the pack through the neighboring Dead Man ranch into the Y Canyon pastures on Collins Park. Instead of picking off a grown cow every week or two, the wolves began knocking off one or two calves a day. Once five kills were confirmed, a kill order was placed on all three Francisco wolves. Traps were set simultaneously, and both the alpha and yearling males were trapped and removed. The female, with a kill order on her head, was allowed to den and raise her pups. Once the pups were born, the agency dropped the kill order on her and began packing in elk carcasses to feed her. She and her litter were eventually removed to captivity. A month after her removal from the wild, she died while receiving a checkup.

The families living in the Collins Park area breathed a short-lived sigh of relief over the impending removal of the Francisco Pack, but the killings didn't stop. Darcy Ely remembers the Francisco alpha female and her litter of pups raised on the Four Drag cattle in Arizona, all but wiping out the Elys' 2002 calf crop. One of those pups and its mate swiftly joined the Francisco Pack on what was rapidly becoming known as the Catron County killing field.

The Ring Pack was not new to the area; they had been on the Dead Man in 2004 and had been removed after multiple livestock kills. The agency wolf team decided in May that it was time to place them back into the Gila Wilderness staging area for yet another chance at life in the wild. The pack immediately left the wilderness for the same ranches they killed on the previous year. WS personnel began confirming more calf kills and attributing them to the Ring Pack.

Because the alpha female was pregnant, the FWS wolf team would not admit she was involved in the killings. One early Ring kill appeared to have two different bite marks. Wildlife Services initially determined the larger one was a mismeasurement and the smaller one belonged to the Ring Pack alpha male. FWS did nothing to dissuade them even though the wolf team had all the vitals on the wolves they were releasing. Enough cattle and

calves were confirmed to allow another kill order on the Ring Pack alpha male, but not on the female.

Don and Jeannie Jones were coming out of church at Horse Springs when good news reached them. Wildlife Services personnel met them in the parking lot to let them know the Ring Pack male had been lethally removed. Oddly, the alpha male wolf had a much larger bite measurement than WS expected. Even with this proof of another confirmed kill, the wolf team clung to the story that the smaller measurement on the first kill did not belong to the Ring female.

The female is still at large and living with her litter of pups on the Y Canyon Ranch. The Joneses say the female had three strikes against her at the same time the male did and should have been removed or shot at the same time. Jeannie Jones wants to know when the Ring female will begin to teach her young to hunt the ranch's calves. That should happen in the fall. If not, the Ring alpha female will be cleared to start over in the new year.

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This Mexican wolf is in a trap, but not for the first time. This convicted killer was trapped, confined for a year, then rereleased. Preston Bates loses a calf a week. People worry about their kids.

Jim and Sherry Haught also suffered from both Francisco and Ring wolves. Since their home was on the ranch where they work, their own small private herd was defenseless, about 20 miles away. Dealing with a family health crisis and full-time jobs, the Haughts were spread too thin to cope with the kills on their newly purchased Dead Man ranch. They lost over 50 percent of their calf crop to the Ring and Francisco wolves in the summer of 2005. Agency personnel barely seemed to know the small ranch was there and never informed the Haughts of the wolves' presence when they located them in the Dead Man pastures.

"It was our hope to build our own home on the Dead Man this summer," says Sherry, "but things are looking pretty slim right now."

The Haughts felt their first obligation was to their employer and they rapidly found the kill a lone male made on the ranch where they worked. Wolf 859 was trapped swiftly, using the dead calf as bait. It was a practice the wolf team frowned upon and considered unfair, until ordered by superiors to do so. Wolf 859 was accidentally captured on his first confirmed kill, so he will likely be rereleased in the near future.

The Haughts finally moved their cattle off their grazing allotment and onto leased land closer to their home, but plan on selling them off this fall, simply because a rancher cannot pay the bills with a less-than-50-percent calf crop.

The Saddle Pack denned just to the east of the Catron County killing fields but not far enough from the ranches. Jim and Judy Blair of the O Bar O Ranch lost several calves to the rereleased Saddle Pack before finally having one kill confirmed last August.

Preston Bates has lived for three years with the Luna Pack near the Gila Wilderness. His working cow ranch also offers trail rides and pack trips. Although he has had dozens of wolf kills, none has been confirmed. This year he will sell his stock horses to make up for the calves the wolves are consuming on a regular basis.

"We have lost one calf a week for the last four weeks," Bates says. "That is what we have found anyway."

Bates isn't just worried about his calves. Being up close and personal with wolves is one thing for an experienced outdoorsman, but the Snow Lake campground is only a few miles from his ranch. Based on his own Luna Pack experiences, he worries about the kids during the summer tourist season.

"I had the Luna Pack in my camp last Tuesday, about 20 yards from camp at 7:30 in the morning while I was making coffee," Bates says. "No fear in them whatsoever, even when I fired a shotgun over them."

The N Bar Ranch tourist business will likely fold with the sale of Bates' saddle horses. Several more people in Catron County will be out of work when it does.

Once the cattle in the western end of the county are gone, much needed tax revenue will disappear from the county budget. There are two elementary schools and one high school in Catron County. One of the elementary schools was nearly closed last year due to lack of funding.

The recent five-year review of the Mexican wolf program was completed in the summer of 2005. The agency claimed that the program was a raving success. However, in spite of the National Environmental Policy Act requirements, the five-year review was also the first time a socioeconomic study had been done in relation to the program. The reality is that livestock depredation had been much higher than predicted in the original plan, and the cumulative effects of the program, on top of spotted wolf management and other endangered species issues, are killing the communities in the county. Ranchers are losing their businesses and being permanently and irreparably harmed by the wolves. The original rule and EIS never adequately addressed the severity of the issues or the cumulative effects the current program would have. Worse, none of the incidents above will even make it into the five-year review since it is already two years late.

While the public waits to learn whether the review of the Mexican wolf program recommends continuing as is, continuing with modification, or termination of the program, ranchers in the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area look at terminations of their own. The community has learned that the wolf team and wolf advocates believe the problems can be solved if they have more room and even more wolves. They suggest removal of the BRWRA boundary as the cure for all ills and release of more wolves as the answer.

They still haven't been in the country long enough to figure out the cardinal rule of ranch life. As Will Rogers said: "If you find yourself in a hole, the first thing to do is stop digging." ■

Laura Schneberger lives with her husband and children, and ranches in southwest New Mexico where the wolf and the cattle coexist. Having lived through several unpleasant close-encounter wolf experiences and livestock kills, she occasionally sticks up for the neighbors dealing with wolf issues. While not having wolf trouble at the moment, the ranch is enjoying an unnatural invasion of elk fleeing from the Gila Wilderness wolf release staging ground.