



Via Email

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Re: Let Mexican Wolves Roam Free North of I-40

Dear Ms. Lueders, Mr. McGee, and Mr. Crowder:

The undersigned 23 wildlife conservation organizations write to express our dismay that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Arizona Game and Fish Department intend to capture and translocate a family of Mexican gray wolves living north of Interstate 40.¹ We ask that you let these wolves roam freely and contribute to Mexican wolf recovery through range expansion into the prime habitat of the Grand Canyon ecoregion.

The Grand Canyon ecoregion has millions of acres of public land with few roads. An abundance of elk and deer could provide food for wolves, and Grand Canyon National Park could provide a safe haven.² Indeed, numerous studies have demonstrated that the Grand Canyon ecoregion could support a robust wolf population.³ And as demonstrated by the travels of

¹ U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, *Mexican wolf captured north of Interstate 40 near Flagstaff, Arizona* (July 18, 2024).

² Grand Canyon Wolf Recovery Project, *Grand Canyon ecoregion* (2020), <https://gcwolfrecovery.org/about-us/grand-canyon-region>.

³ Sneed, P.G., 2001, *The feasibility of gray wolf reintroduction to the Grand Canyon ecoregion*, Endanger. Species Update 18: 153–158; Carroll, C., M.K. Phillips, and C.A. Lopez-Gonzalez, 2004, *Spatial analysis of restoration potential and population viability of the wolf (Canis lupus) in the Southwestern United States and Northern Mexico*, report prepared for the Turner Endangered Species Fund; Menke K., Sneed, P.G., Stevens, L., Corbo, N., Burke, K., Crumbo, K., 2006, *Modeling potential gray wolf habitat in the Grand Canyon ecoregion*, GIS model and

multiple wolves, including Anubis and now F2979 (recently named “Hope”) and her family (“Kendrick Peak pack”), the Grand Canyon ecoregion connects with areas where wolves now live in eastern Arizona and western New Mexico.⁴

As a baseline, please be aware that there is nothing in law or regulation requiring you to capture Mexican wolves who are located north of I-40. While the Mexican Wolf Recovery Plan (that the Service and the Department jointly maintain is a non-binding expression of intent) describes the Service’s current “focus” on establishing populations in Mexico and south of I-40, it does not preclude range expansion north of I-40.⁵ Similarly, the 2022 10(j) management rule states that the Service “intends” to relocate wolves that roam northward, but does not require federal or state agencies to capture such wolves.⁶ Furthermore, the 2022 recovery permit (issued pursuant to Section 10(a)(1)(A) of the Endangered Species Act) provides state agencies the authority to relocate wolves who leave the Mexican Wolf Experimental Population Area, while using language of discretion – “may capture” – that contemplates allowing wolves to remain on the landscape.⁷

In short, your agencies have no legal obligation to return wolves living north of I-40 to the Mexican Wolf Experimental Population Area, despite inaccurate public statements to the contrary.⁸

Moreover, removing them would be an unnecessary impediment to recovery. The frequent removals of individual Mexican wolves by federal and state agencies, and now potentially the removal of a wolf pack, follow a management path markedly different than was taken after the northern gray wolf reintroduction to Yellowstone National Park and central Idaho. Non-interference in that reintroduction effort directly led to natural recolonization of then-vacant wolf habitats and supported necessary growth of the population.

It is undisputed that Mexican wolves also need multiple populations to achieve recovery. As such, and particularly given that the projections for demographic growth of the reintroduced population in Mexico are not being met on the ground, allowing Mexican wolves to expand their range northward into the Grand Canyon ecoregion would further their conservation, as the Endangered Species Act requires.⁹

presentation; Carroll, C., Phillips, M.K., Lopez-Gonzalez, C.A., Schumaker, N.H., 2006, *Defining recovery goals and strategies for endangered species: the wolf as a case study*, *Bioscience* 56: 25–37; Carroll, C., Fredrickson, R.J., Lacy, R.C. 2013, *Developing metapopulation connectivity criteria from genetic and habitat data to recover the endangered Mexican wolf*, *Conserv. Biol.* 28: 76–86.

⁴ Western Watersheds Project, *Mexican gray wolf “Anubis” returns to northern Arizona* (Oct. 27, 2021); Grand Canyon Wolf Recovery Project, *Press Release: Student Group Names Wandering Wolf “Hope”* (July 30, 2024).

⁵ U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, *Mexican wolf recovery plan*, Second revision, at 12 (Sep. 2022).

⁶ 87 Fed. Reg. 39348, 39353 (July 1, 2022) (codified at 50 C.F.R. pt. 17).

⁷ U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, *Native endangered species recovery permit*, Permit Number: ESPER0048320 (Dec. 27, 2022).

⁸ Crowder, C., *Opinion: Why Arizona must keep Mexican gray wolves south of Interstate 40*, *AZ Central* (Nov. 4, 2023).

⁹ 16 U.S.C. §§ 1531(b), 1531(c)(1).

It is important to recognize that the Service’s intent to limit Mexican wolf recovery in the United States to a single, isolated population south of I-40 is premised on establishment of a “resilient, genetically diverse” population in Mexico. Even if that important but difficult goal could be achieved, numerous Mexican wolf experts have raised concerns about the reasonableness of the Service’s sole reliance on a second Mexican wolf population in Mexico, rebutting the conclusions in the Mexican Wolf Recovery Plan and providing evidence that at least three interconnected populations will be required for recovery, including one such population in the Grand Canyon ecoregion.¹⁰ In part on that basis, wildlife conservation groups have challenged in court the Service’s failure to fully assess how establishment of a Mexican wolf population north of I-40 could further Mexican wolf conservation.¹¹

Please understand that the specific facts surrounding the known wolves currently living near Flagstaff present an extraordinarily compelling case for allowing them to remain there. In the past, the Service has justified the capture and relocation of a wolf dispersing north of I-40, F2754, who schoolchildren named Asha, by asserting that such lone wolves cannot contribute to Mexican wolf recovery because they are unlikely to breed.¹² Here, in contrast, wolves are living together, which creates the possibility of breeding in the wild.

Additionally, the agencies’ own guidance document, “Management Options For Mexican Wolves Outside the MWEPA,” provides that wolves on federal or state land should be translocated “only if” they demonstrate problem behaviors.¹³ Because the Service explained that Hope, one of the wolves living near Flagstaff, was “on U.S. Forest Service lands,” the wolves should not be removed, particularly in the absence of documented conflicts.

The inconsistency of the Service’s purported justifications for removing wolves north of I-40 suggests that the intended removal of the Kendrick Peak pack has more to do with politics than wolf conservation. That would be contrary to the mandates of the Endangered Species Act, which requires that the Service further wolf conservation using the best available science and that actions taken pursuant to recovery permits “enhance the propagation or survival of the affected species.”¹⁴

We urge you to pay closer attention to the conservationists’ successful litigation that challenged the 2015 Mexican wolf 10(j) management rule, in which a federal court criticized the

¹⁰ See, e.g., U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2017, *Peer review comments and responses on the Draft Biological Report for the Mexican Wolf*, Comment of and FWS response to Dr. Jeff Stetz (explaining that “the number of assumptions, potential biases, lack of data, and reliance on information from other populations makes it difficult to place a great deal of faith” in Martinez-Meyer (2017), upon which the Service relies); Carroll, C., R.J. Fredrickson and R.C. Lacy, 2013, *Developing metapopulation connectivity criteria from genetic and habitat data to recover the endangered Mexican wolf*, *Conservation Biology* 28(1):76–86; Carroll, C. R.C. Lacy, R.J. Fredrickson, D.J. Rohlf, S.A. Hendricks and M.K. Phillips, 2019, *Biological and sociopolitical sources of uncertainty in population viability analysis for endangered species recovery planning*, *Scientific Reports* 9:10130.

¹¹ *Ctr. for Biological Diversity et al. v. Haaland et al.*, Nos. 4:22-cv-00303, 4:22-cv-00453 (D. Ariz.).

¹² U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, *Female Mexican wolf captured and paired with mate in captivity* (Dec. 11, 2023).

¹³ U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, *Management options for Mexican wolves outside the MWEPA* (Jun. 27, 2022).

¹⁴ 16 U.S.C. § 1539(a)(1)(A).

Service’s “hard limit on dispersal north of I-40.”¹⁵ The court cautioned that the agency’s plans to capture and return wolves who venture outside the Mexican Wolf Experimental Population Area “threaten to compound the problem” of the 2015 rule’s failure to provide for the long-term conservation of the species.¹⁶ The court held that the 2015 rule’s deficiencies violated the Endangered Species Act.

Copies of the materials supporting this letter are available at this link: <https://diversity.box.com/s/ezeukv09oknsn2tkgl6skr3xepIndahd>. Thank you for considering our request that you leave these wolves in place, and we look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



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¹⁵ *Ctr. for Biological Diversity v. Jewell*, No. CV-15-00019-TUC-JGZ (l), 2018 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 56436, at *48, n.13 (D. Ariz. Mar. 31, 2018).

¹⁶ *Id.*

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