EXPERT INSIGHT | Farmers and Ranchers First Agenda

THE MEXICAN GRAY WOLF: A THREAT TO RURAL PROSPERITY

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U.S. CONSERVATION POLICY MUST PUT RANCHERS & RURAL COMMUNITIES FIRST, NOT WOLVES AND RADICAL ENVIRONMENTAL PRIORITIES

"Wolves have killed our cattle in Arizona and in New Mexico. Wolves have changed our culture. They have changed how we live in wolf country,"— Tom Paterson, Rancher, Congressional Testimony

U.S. RANCHING COMMUNITIES ARE FACING ECONOMIC AND EMOTIONAL LOSS

Rural communities across the country, particularly in Arizona and New Mexico, are living in fear for their residents' physical, economic, and emotional well-being. The experimental reintroduction of the Mexican gray wolf (Mexican wolf), starting in 1998 with Endangered Species Act (ESA) protections, has resulted in these predators attacking ranchers' cattle, horses, and pets, and imposing other costs of weight loss in cattle, veterinary bills for injured animals, and further mitigation measures.

The presence of the Mexican wolf also places an emotional tax on rural Americans. Ranchers are losing sleep at night patrolling their land, county commissioners are posting deputies at schools so children can play outside, and there are reports of killings of beloved horses and pets. Further, these predators have become increasingly habituated to humans.

Their presence constantly reminds rural southwesterners that federal and (some) state policymakers continue to put environmentalist wildlife protections over public safety and rural prosperity, underscoring the longstanding cultural and policy divide between rural Americans and decisionmakers.

BACKGROUND

The Mexican wolf has a long, winding history in America involving the ESA. At their peak, thousands of Mexican wolves populated the forested, mountainous areas of New Mexico, Arizona, Texas, and northern Mexico. By the 1970s, however, they were nearly extinct as a result of joint private citizen and government eradication efforts, largely due to their preying on livestock.

In 1976, the Mexican wolf was officially listed and protected under the ESA, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) was instructed to implement a plan for recovery. As part of the plan, the United States entered into an agreement with Mexico to bring five wolves captured in Mexico between 1977 and 1980 into the United States for a captive breeding program. By 1998, FWS began releasing repopulated Mexican wolves into a Mexican Wolf Experimental Population Area in Arizona and New Mexico, from south of I-40 to the Mexican border. Today, 50 captive breeding facilities across the two countries house hundreds of Mexican wolves, in addition to those already released.

These efforts, primarily carried out by the United States, have been successful in repopulating the Mexican wolf over the past 27 years. According to a December 2024 5-Year Evaluation of the Mexican Wolf Recovery Strategy that assessed targets identified in the Mexican Wolf Recovery Plan, FWS expressed that the U.S. population of Mexican wolves has surpassed interim abundance and release targets, as well as predictions for gene diversity and population growth. The interim abundance targets for the Mexican Wolf Recovery Plan in 2022 were 145 for the United States, and at least 242 wolves were observed. In 2024, FWS said there were at least 286 Mexican wolves on the United States landscape. This does not account for underestimates, which, if considered, would bring the total number of Mexican wolves on the United States landscape closer to 320, a number the

Mexican Wolf Recovery Plan has identified as central to delisting. Other data shows the Mexican wolf population increased by 11% from 2023 to 2025, further indicating consistent growth.

Southwestern ranchers, hunters, outfitters, guides, and rural residents can verify these successful federal repopulation efforts, which have unfortunately come at their expense. The same issues experienced in the 1900s have resurfaced during the Mexican wolf's repopulation, with the predators preying on livestock, elk, moose, sheep, and pets, both on and off government grazing lands. In response, numerous county governments have issued public-safety disaster declarations. Like déjà vu, ranching operations, public safety, and rural prosperity are once again secondary to saving wolves.

Many U.S. ranching communities were established when the government actively *supported* predator removal, shaping generations of land use and livestock management. Today, these communities would like to see their ability to fully manage predators, outside of restrictive ESA protections, restored.

ECONOMIC IMPACTS

In March 2025, the University of Arizona published a study on the direct and indirect effects of Mexican wolf depredation on ranch returns. On the lower end, it was found that a 2% loss of calves could reduce a 367-head ranch's net income by 4%, or about $5,195 that year. Higher loss levels, such as 14% of calves, could result in a loss of net income by as much as 34%, or roughly $42,599. In addition to direct depredation, ranchers reported indirect effects of wolf-related stress reducing weight gain in calves, leading to lower sale weights, which can occur across the herd. Further, additional management costs to deter wolf presence reduce ranch returns.

Additionally, Mexican wolves may affect ranch property values by reducing financial viability and amenity values. Collectively, long-term ranch exposure to Mexican wolves may render ranches financially unviable long-term, flying in the face of federal efforts to restore lasting rural prosperity.

There are also economic impacts on taxpayers associated with Mexican wolf recovery efforts. According to FWS and congressional testimony, the cost to recover the Mexican wolf as of December 31, 2024, was $74.6 million, or $286,839.16 per wolf, totaling 286 wolves in focus. Further, $15 million has been spent over the past three years to pay for this and related recovery activities. These represent dollars that tax-paying farmers and ranchers may want directed elsewhere, such as towards veterinary bills, decreased conception rates, cattle weights, and active avoidance costs. Also, the federal government currently does not reimburse counties for public safety or depredation investigations, which can cost $100,000 per year for an impacted county.

CONCLUSION

Rural ranching communities can no longer afford to let policymakers influenced by environmental activists force them into living in fear of Mexican wolves. Below are policy recommendations that can deliver reassurance to ranching communities and help drive a more prosperous rural America.

Additionally, while this expert insight is specific to the Mexican wolf, it is imperative to note that rural communities nationwide are suffering from the threat of ESA-protected gray wolves, including in California and Colorado. Therefore, the policy recommendations below may be adapted and/or broadened to address other circumstances.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Congress should pass legislation removing the Mexican wolf from the lists of threatened and endangered species under the ESA.** Given that the Mexican wolf population has steadily grown as part of an experimental program with greater management flexibilities, Congress must delist the Mexican wolf under the ESA. In doing so, to match congressional intent and for regulatory consistency, Congress should direct a full repeal of the following: "Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants; Endangered Status for the Mexican Wolf" published January 16, 2015, and the final rule titled "Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants; Revision to the Nonessential Experimental Population of the Mexican Wolf" published on July 1, 2022. Notably, the House Committee on Natural Resources held a related legislative hearing on September 3, 2025.

- **The FWS should consider issuing a rulemaking removing the Mexican wolf from ESA lists of threatened and endangered species.** Absent congressional action, the administration should exhaust options to pursue a legally defensible rulemaking to delist the Mexican wolf under the ESA.

- **To the extent authorities allow, the FWS should no longer consider population status of the Mexican wolf, or in fact any species or subspecies, in Mexico when evaluating the status of the same population in the United States.** Despite 90% of the Mexican wolf's original habitat falling within Mexico, the Mexican government's recovery efforts pale in comparison to those of the United States. Mexico observed only 35 Mexican wolves, despite having a target of 100, during the last review of the Mexican Wolf Recovery Plan in 2022. Meanwhile, the United States observed 242 wolves, exceeding the target of 145 in the same period. The United States must no longer lower the bar for, and develop mutual policy goals with, a foreign country unwilling to recover a species native to its own land. Such policy linkage has historically served as a convenient way for environmentalists to move the goalposts in recovery efforts as well.

- **Absent congressional action or rulemaking, the FWS should work with state and local officials to pursue human safety exemptions for taking Mexican wolves threatening rural communities.** The Code of Federal Regulations permits specimens to be taken when they "constitute a demonstrable but nonimmediate threat to human safety." Federal, state, and local policymakers should collaborate to explore options like these regarding the Mexican wolf when public safety is at risk.

- **Federal and state regulators should work together to update evidence standards for determining livestock depredations by Mexican wolves in Arizona and New Mexico.** Heavily applauded by environmental groups, federal depredation evidentiary standards were last revised in 2023 for the Mexican wolf in Arizona and New Mexico. These standards should be revised to ensure 1) state and local officials can play a more active role in making depredation determinations, and 2) such determinations are more accurate. This could result in producers more fairly gaining access to indemnity programs, including through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Livestock Indemnity Program, for compensation for losses due to government-led repopulation efforts.