

Recently Received Public Comments on Mexican Gray Wolf Recovery

GENERAL COMMENTS

Many comments expressing support for or opposition to wolf recovery were received. Although these comments were not germane to the specific action proposed, we thank everyone who took the time to comment.

Comment

Sites within the primitive area or wilderness areas should be considered.

Response

Because of the increased cost and environmental impact from pen construction in the primitive area, the interagency team sought to find appropriate sites outside the boundary to construct pens. Several suitable sites were identified. Some are very close to the primitive area, providing wolves with easy access to the area without the additional allocation of resources and impact of construction in the primitive area. The team will reconsider the issue in the future if it is deemed necessary to do so.

Comment

Some sites are on the edge of the primary recovery zone, not centered in the wolf recovery area.

Response

The objective was to identify sites that were as central to the entire wolf recovery area (not just the primary area) as was possible. The distance from recovery area boundaries was one important criteria in site selection, and several sites considered in initial deliberations were eliminated because of relatively high potential for wolves to disperse beyond recovery boundaries. However, the Service is limited to building pens within Greenlee County (the primary recovery zone). Distance from boundaries had to be considered in the context of several other criteria, including livestock use, prey distribution, accessibility, water availability, and recreational uses.

Comment

Newly released wolves would pose a threat to the safety of campers, hikers, and other recreationists using the area.

Response

Millions of people camp, hike, fish, hunt, snowmobile, ride ATVs, and engage in other forms of recreation annually in Alaska, Canada, and Minnesota, where large populations of wolves exist. There is no documented evidence that wolves pose a threat to the lives of

outdoor recreationists. Protocols for raising Mexican wolves in captivity are designed to instill within the wolves a fear of humans. We believe that released Mexican wolves will pose no significant threat to the lives of humans using nearby areas.

Comment

This proposal requires the preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).

Response

One of the purposes of an Environmental Assessment is to determine if the expected impacts of the proposed action are significant enough to warrant the preparation of an EIS. The Service has determined that the impacts associated with the construction of soft release pens are not significant and that the preparation of an EIS is not warranted. The Service prepared an EIS for the overall reintroduction project, of which construction of release pens is a minor part.

Comment

Some pen sites are too close to areas of high human use, such as communities, homes, and main roads.

Response

Wolves are expected to establish territories covering 100 to 300 square miles. Ultimately, we expect them to explore most of the designated recovery area (about 7,000 square miles) and establish territories in the areas they find most suitable. Thus, wolves will have the opportunity to encounter areas of high human use regardless of the location of release pens. In general, we expect wolves to avoid these areas. Provisions are included in the draft final experimental population rule to control wolves that conflict with human activities in ways that cause problems or become a nuisance. The Service believes that all release pen locations are a sufficient distance from human use areas to minimize potential conflicts.

Comment

Recreation opportunities will be limited in areas near the release pens.

Response

Recreational use of areas within one mile of release pens may be restricted during the short time (< 3 months) that wolves are in the pens. A one-mile radius circle encompasses slightly over three square miles. Thus, a total of about 9 square miles may be closed to recreational uses for about two months. This comprises about one-tenth of one percent of the designated Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area . We believe that this represents an insignificant temporary impact on overall recreational use of public lands.

Comment

Will new roads need to be constructed for access to the pen sites?

Response

All pen sites will be accessible from existing roads. Minor improvements may be made to some existing roads.

Comment

Were "hard releases" considered?

Response

The Service determined that "soft releases" was the most appropriate technique for the initial releases. We believe that this technique will reduce initial movements and improve survival. Through the application of adaptive management principles, the hard release procedure may be considered for future releases.

Comment

Are the pens large enough to accommodate the needs of the wolves?

Response

The Mexican wolves to be released are accustomed to captivity. The release pens will be approximately the same size as the pens at the Sevilleta Wolf Management Facility and at other facilities that hold Mexican wolves. We believe the release pens are sufficiently large to accomplish their purpose of providing a secure environment in which wolves have the opportunity to orient and acclimate to the release area.

SITE SPECIFIC COMMENTS

Hannagan Meadows Heliport

Through the consultation and coordination process, the Hannagan Meadows Heliport site was eliminated from further consideration. The following comments were considered in this process.

Comment

The site is too high in elevation for Mexican wolves, who are accustomed to climatic conditions at Sevilleta National Wildlife Refuge and were historically found at elevations of 4,000 to 7,000 ft.

Response

Wolves are capable of adapting to a wide range of climatic conditions, and the wolves in soft-release pens will have adequate cover to protect them from the elements. The Sevilleta pens are located in a mountain canyon which receives snow and where winter temperatures often stay well below freezing throughout the day. The primary determining factor in wolf habitat is available prey, not elevation. The Hannagan Meadows Heliport was identified because the site is located near south-facing slopes favored by elk moving to higher elevations in spring. The objective is to put wolves in the vicinity of native prey once released. It also borders the primitive area.

Comment

Hannagan Meadows Heliport is necessary for emergency fire crews.

Response

We agree. However, we would expect that wolves would be released from the pen well before the heliport was occupied by emergency crews which do not normally arrive until May.

Comment

There are several campgrounds and high recreational use near the Hannagan Meadows Heliport.

Response

Wolves would be out of pens long before the area receives heavy campground and recreational use. However, there would not be a need to close campgrounds, nor limit recreational use except in the immediate area of the pen. This area is already closed because of the heliport.

Comment

The sound of nearby snowmobiles and other recreation in Hannagan Meadows may disturb wolves.

Response

We agree that frequent constant sounds of nearby snowmobiles, recreational skiers, and road traffic could be disturbing to wolves, or potentially habituate them to sounds of human activity. Because our objective is to minimize such habituation, we have decided to eliminate the Hannagan Meadows Heliport site from further consideration.

Hannagan Meadows, Hawks Nest, and Turkey Creek

Comment

These sites are located near spring livestock calving areas.

Response

Pen location and timing of occupancy will be managed to avoid conflict with livestock practices and minimize initial contact of wolves with livestock. No wolves will occupy pens or be released within one month of the arrival of cattle on pastures where pens are located.

Campbell Flats, Crow Poison, Pace Creek

The Campbell Flat site was eliminated from further consideration during the consultation and coordination process. However, the following comment was considered during this process.

Comment

These sites are located too close to the Alpine community or other human habitation.

Response

All of these sites are located a minimum of 4 air miles from the community of Alpine, and farther overland as a wolf would travel. All are situated in areas of prime native prey base and appropriate wolf habitat with natural dispersal corridors heading away from human communities. Husbandry protocols for captive Mexican wolves instill avoidance of humans. We believe that released wolves will avoid human communities. Wolves will be monitored, and if any establish a pattern of using areas of human concentration or in any way become a nuisance, they will be relocated away from these areas.

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Pace Creek

Comment

There is a girls church camp within 3 miles of the pen site.

Response

Wolves will be released from the pens well before the church camp is occupied for the season. Wolves may disperse well away from the pen site. If they should remain near the site, we do not believe they present more threat to human safety than other native wildlife present. However, if wolves should establish a pattern of using areas of human concentration or become a nuisance, they will be relocated.

Comment

The site is too close to permittee's private land at the "Cambern Place".

Response

The proposed pen site is approximately 1.5 miles from the private land mentioned. We do not anticipate any impacts to private land from placement of wolf pens on the nearby USFS land. Ultimately, we expect wolves to occupy suitable habitat throughout the Apache and Gila National Forest. This means that wolves have the potential to be near or on private inholdings, as do other wildlife. However, if wolves become a nuisance on private land, they will be removed.

XXX

Comment

Concern about restriction of access to trail head for recreational users.

Response

The restriction will be temporary, for a maximum of 12 weeks, and will not apply to the Blue River Corridor. Alternative access to the trail along the Blue River Corridor currently exists, but if necessary, additional access may be provided.

Comment

The riparian corridor is a major movement corridor for other predators, and may be used for north-south travel by wolves.

Response

We agree. Wolves will move and establish an extensive home range wherever they are released. The riparian corridor should provide immediate access to the Blue Primitive area and the livestock-free Sandrock allotment if wolves follow it north, as they are likely to do if they exhibit any "homing" tendency towards Sevilleta to the northeast. It is also possible that wolves will follow the corridor south.

Comment

There would be little or no association with livestock on the site.

Response

We agree that this is a positive feature of this site.

Comment

The ungulate density is locally low.

Response

Information from local wildlife managers suggest that although the ungulate density is not as high as in some other areas, it is adequate to support a family group of wolves.

Turkey Creek

Comment

There is an adjacent pasture which will have livestock use when wolves are released

Response

We agree. However, the pasture where the release site is located will not have cattle when wolves are in pens nor when they are released. Additionally, grazing management plans for adjacent allotments are such that a large area to the north and east will not be stocked at that time. The local native ungulate prey population is considered good by wildlife managers. Ultimately, most wolves within the recovery area will have the opportunity to encounter livestock.

Alma Mesa; Charlie Moore; Muddy Tank; Sites along FR 567 north of Primitive Area

Response

All of these sites were considered, but rejected because they did not meet all of the preferred criteria.

Engineer Springs

Response

This site was investigated and determined to be a suitable site for release.

Campbell Blue

Response

This site was investigated and determined to be a suitable site.

COMMENTS RECEIVED WHICH RAISED ISSUES PREVIOUSLY ADDRESSED IN THE FINAL ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT ON REINTRODUCTION OF MEXICAN WOLVES AND ARE BEYOND THE SCOPE OF THIS ANALYSIS

The following issues raised in comments on the proposal to construct soft-release pens were addressed in Chapter 5 of the final *Environmental Impact Statement on Reintroduction of the Mexican Wolf within its Historic Range in the Southwestern United States*: effects of wolves on deer and elk populations; effects on bighorn sheep populations; adequacy of the prey base to support wolves; depredation on livestock and pets; effects on hunting and other forms of recreation, especially camping and hiking; effects on other land use activities on public lands; threats to safety of humans; effects on local economies; suitability of area as habitat for Mexican wolves; appropriateness of listing of the Mexican wolf as an endangered species in light of populations of gray wolves existing in Canada and Alaska; genetic purity of captive Mexican wolves; the appropriateness of using the nonessential, experimental population designation for reintroduced Mexican wolves; and the overall cost of the reintroduction project.

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