



Indiscriminate traps kill, injure endangered Mexican wolves, impeding recovery

Feb 13, 2019 | [News Release](#), [Protecting Mexican Wolves](#)

As a bill to ban recreational and commercial trapping works its way through the New Mexico legislature, indiscriminate trapping is proving an enormous impediment for endangered Mexican gray wolves' already uphill battle toward recovery. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service reports that, since Nov. 2018, five lobos have fallen victim to traps in New Mexico. One of the wolves, female 1565 died in veterinary care. Another, male 1669 lost a leg. Male 1556 was treated and released but was later observed limping. Two other wolves were captured and released without injury.

New Mexico House Bill 366, called "Roxy's Law" in honor of a dog who died in a trap on public lands in November, would prohibit traps across public lands in New Mexico with exemptions for human health and safety, ecosystem management, and New Mexico Department of Game and Fish depredation trapping. In an 8-4 vote the bill passed the House Energy, Environment, and Natural Resources Committee on Saturday.

"Trapping take a tremendous toll on New Mexico—companion animals, native furbearers, and our most imperiled species pay the price for these indiscriminate killing devices," said Chris Smith, southern Rockies wildlife advocate for WildEarth Guardians. "Public lands and our desert ecosystems cannot bear this burden any longer and it's time for our elected officials to take action."

"We are grateful for the state legislature's thoughtful consideration of House Bill 366 to strike a better balance among diverse interests on New Mexico's public lands—toward improved public safety, animal welfare, and ecosystem health—that would protect endangered species from dangerous, indiscriminate traps," said Jessica Johnson, chief legislative officer for Animal Protection Voters.

"Trapping serves no viable wildlife management purpose and is ethically indefensible," said Camilla Fox, executive director of Project Coyote. "Body-gripping traps, which are inherently indiscriminate, pose a danger not only to pets, but also to threatened and endangered species including Mexican wolves."

“Banning leghold traps on public lands will save the lives of all types of animals, including endangered Mexican wolves,” said Michael Robinson, conservation advocate with the Center for Biological Diversity. “Traps are inhumane, sometimes fatal, and the smelly bait intended to attract coyotes is just as likely to draw curious wolves.”

“This is yet another chilling example of the grave threats lobos face, on top of an already dire genetic crisis,” said Kelly Nokes, shared Earth wildlife attorney at Western Environmental Law Center. “Mexican wolves are among our nation’s most critically imperiled species and they need proper protection if they are ever to recover as the law demands. Already threatened by an illegal management rule we’re challenging in court that banishes them from necessary habitat and caps their population at a number too low for recovery, lobos should not be further exposed to the lethal grip of indiscriminate traps strewn across New Mexico’s public lands -- the Mexican wolf population is simply too fragile as it is.”

The annual official count of wild Mexican wolves is ongoing currently. As of last February, there were 114 lobos in the wilds of New Mexico and Arizona. The past year has seen a large number of Mexican wolf mortalities. During the 2017-2018 trapping season, at least four lobos were caught in traps. Two subsequently died.

Domestic dogs are also caught in traps on public lands. Along with Roxy, Ranger died from trap wounds this year. Kekoa lost a leg to a trap in December.

BACKGROUND:

TRAPPING

Trapping on public lands is legal in New Mexico. No bag limits exist for furbearer species. The law does not require trap locations to be marked, signed, or for any warnings to be present. No gross receipts tax is levied on fur and pelts sold by trappers. No penalties exist for trappers who unintentionally trap non-target species including endangered species, protected species, domestic animals, pets, humans, or livestock.

No database or official record is kept by any public entity and no requirement exists that trappers report when they have captured a dog in their traps. The pattern these incidents follow are usually similar; dogs screaming and frantically biting at the person desperately trying to rescue them. Veterinary and even human medical treatment along with associated expenses can result, as can long-lasting psychological trauma. Neither New Mexico Game and Fish nor trappers are liable for the damages that are caused by traps.

The true toll that trapping takes on native wildlife is difficult to know. Reporting requirements exist for some species, but not for often-trapped so-called “unprotected furbearers” like coyotes and skunks. The accuracy of reporting is unverifiable, and numbers do not adequately articulate the suffering and carnage that traps wreak on bobcats, foxes, critically imperiled Mexican gray wolves, coyotes, and other animals.

The almost singular excuse for the above-mentioned incidents is that trapping is necessary to control carnivore populations, but scientific studies do not support this assertion. In fact, scientific studies show that trapping and lethally removing carnivore species, like coyotes, often exacerbate conflicts such as those with livestock (see *Using Coyotes to Protect Livestock. Wait. What?*, Randy Comeleo, *Oregon Small Farm News*, Vol. XIII No. 2, p. 2, (Spring 2018)).

The existence of trapping by a minuscule subset of the population using New Mexico's public lands is in direct conflict with one of the state's most valuable economic strengths: outdoor recreation. Highlighted by the recent New Mexico Outdoor Economics Conference in Las Cruces, the outdoor recreation economy in New Mexico is a current and future boon—diversifying and stabilizing the state's economy while creating 99,000 direct jobs in the process. Outdoor recreation includes hiking, camping, wildlife viewing, photography, hunting, horseback riding, angling, trail running, and bicycling. This economy is not bolstered by piles of dead animals discarded by public roadways or by the thousands of wild animals taken from New Mexico's diverse public landscapes for personal profit.

MEXICAN GRAY WOLVES

The lobo, or Mexican wolf, is the smallest, most genetically distinct, and one of the rarest subspecies of gray wolf. The species was listed under the Endangered Species Act in 1976, but recovery efforts have largely foundered because the Service has yet to implement scientifically recommended recovery actions.

Although lobos once widely roamed across the southwestern United States and Mexico, the Mexican wolf was purposefully eradicated from the U.S. on behalf of American livestock, hunting, and trapping interests. Recognizing the Mexican gray wolf's extreme imperilment, the Service listed it on the federal endangered species list in 1976, but recovery efforts have largely foundered because the Service has yet to take the actions science shows is necessary to restore the species.

In 1998, after the few remaining wolves were put into captivity in an attempt to save the species, the Service released 11 Mexican wolves to a small area on the border of Arizona and New Mexico now known as the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area. The program has limped along ever since, with illegal killings and sanctioned removals subverting recovery.

Mexican wolves are at tremendous risk due to their small population size, limited gene pool, threats from trapping, Wildlife Services' activities, and illegal killings.

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