

Wildlife Services employee investigated in wolf death

By Rene Romo / Journal South Reporter

LAS CRUCES – Federal officials have confirmed that a Wildlife Services employee is the subject of an investigation into the killing of an endangered Mexican gray wolf in January in the southwest corner of the state.

Few details about the killing have been disclosed, with spokesmen for Wildlife Services, an arm of the USDA, and Fish and Wildlife Services, which oversees the wolf recovery project, saying that the case is under investigation.

However, a brief statement from Wildlife Services indicates the employee asserted the killing was a case of mistaken identity.

The employee, described as a specialist, was investigating a possible wolf depredation of livestock in January when the incident occurred, wrote Carol Bannerman, a Maryland-based spokeswoman for Wildlife Services. “While on-site he lethally removed a canine, which was then identified as possibly a Mexican wolf.”

Bannerman wrote that the Wildlife Services employee “immediately reported the take” to the agency’s management and to the recovery project’s Interagency Field Team, a group of federal, state and tribal officials who work collaboratively on the wolf program.

Asked specifically about the rumored killing of a wolf by a Wildlife Services employee, Sherry Barrett, the Mexican wolf recovery coordinator for Fish and Wildlife, said she was unable to comment and referred questions to a spokesman.

Nick Chavez, special agent in charge of Fish and Wildlife Service law enforcement for the region, said that a “canine mortality” was being investigated. “I’m not confirming or denying it,” Chavez said when asked about the killing of a wolf by a Wildlife Services employee. “It’s under investigation.”

The killing of the lobo, one of only 75 known to roam national and tribal forest lands in a designated recovery zone in southeast Arizona and southwest New Mexico, by a federal employee would mark another setback to the hotly debated program.

The illegal poaching of wolves has been the biggest cause of wolf mortality since lobos were released to the wild, but the January incident would mark the first known case of a federal employee having killed a wolf not formally designated for removal or capture.

Last week, on March 29, the Fish and Wildlife Service noted the 15th anniversary of the date when eleven wolves were released in Arizona to the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area. Those wolves were the descendants of the last known Mexican gray wolves, seven in all, which were captured in an effort to revive the species after ranchers and a previous incarnation of Wildlife Services trapped, hunted and poisoned the Mexican gray wolf to near extinction in the U.S. and Mexico.

Neither Wildlife Services nor Fish and Wildlife disclosed the exact date or location where the killing occurred, and would not identify the employee involved.

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-- Email the reporter at rromo@abqjournal.com. Call the reporter at 575-526-4462