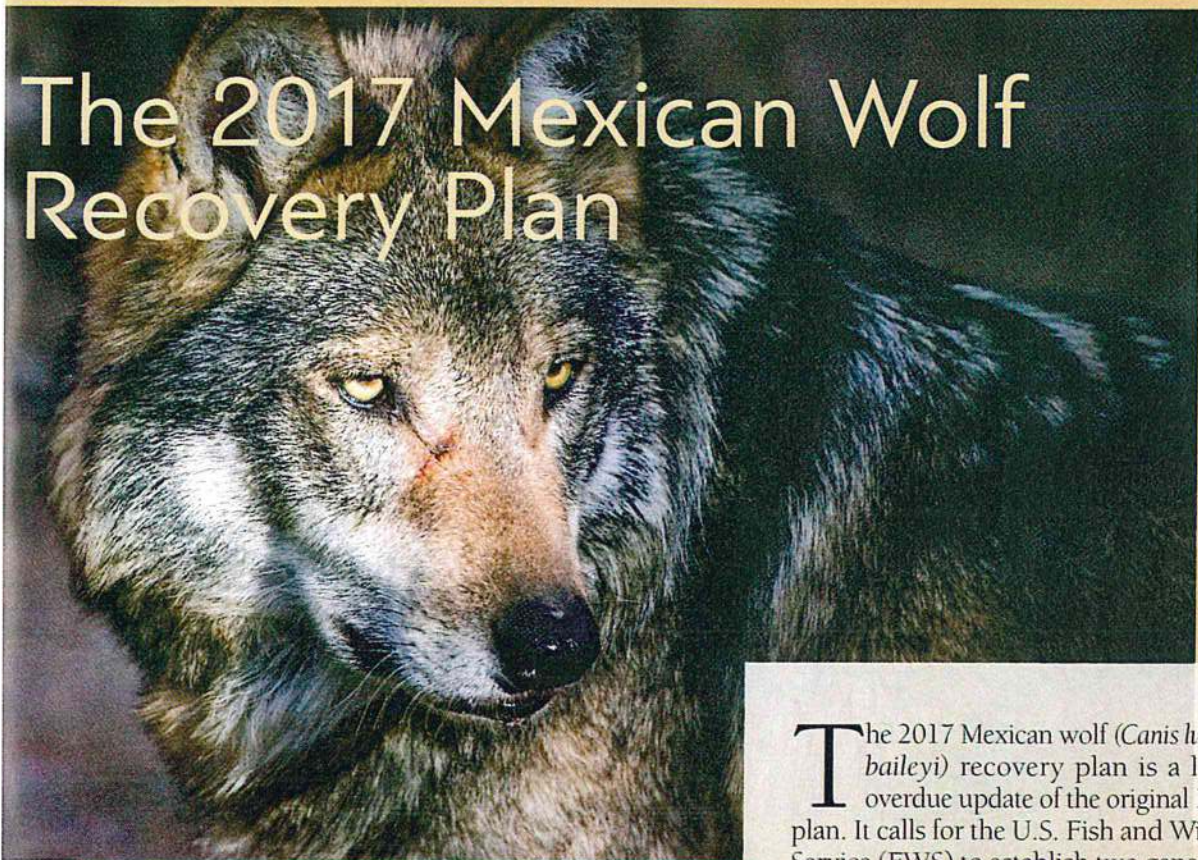


The 2017 Mexican Wolf Recovery Plan



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2017 Mexican Wolf Recovery Plan: Really Good on Anti-Wolf Politics, Really Bad on Pro-Wolf Science

BY MIKE PHILLIPS

The 2017 Mexican wolf (*Canis lupus baileyi*) recovery plan is a long overdue update of the original 1982 plan. It calls for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) to establish two genetically diverse populations in the subspecies' core historical range. The southwestern United States is targeted for a population of ≥ 320 wolves and northern Mexico for a population of ≥ 200 . FWS predicts that 25 to 35 years and \$260 million will be required to establish those populations.

Selection of habitat for the population in Mexico is not based on the best—or even good—science, but rather on political pressure. This was made clear in the following reaction by Utah to an early draft of the plan, which indicated that, because suitable habitat in Mexico was lacking, the recovery region needed to be extended north to areas outside the subspecies' historical range: *Identification of areas outside the historic range of the sub-species as part of the recovery area...will be vigorously opposed (legally and politically) by the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources and the State of Utah.*

Notably, Utah did not indicate that opposition would be based on scientific grounds. Arizona, New Mexico and Colorado adopted similar positions.

The dogged press of political considerations by Arizona, New Mexico, Utah and Colorado ensured that the FWS would finalize the 2017 plan with undue reliance on

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a woefully inadequate habitat-suitability model.

The model relies on correlation between climatic and vegetative factors, and locations where Mexican wolves were collected historically to identify suitable habitat for recovery. FWS and the states justify this reliance by opining that Mexican wolves evolved to be precisely adapted to the narrow range of habitat present within the subspecies' core historical range in Mexico. That opinion, however, is undermined by 1) good science which indicates that wolves are broadly adaptable to climatic and vegetative conditions, and 2) the FWS's longstanding effort to restore the subspecies to Arizona and New Mexico where such conditions differ from those in Mexico.

More important, the model is woefully inadequate because of its disregard for aspects of wolf habitat that good science deems essential to recovery: limited density of livestock, adequate density of wild prey, and large tracts of public land where human-caused mortality is typically low.

Based on the flawed habitat model, the 2017 plan targets 38 percent of recovery on an area in Mexico dominated by small tracts of private property with abundant livestock and unknown numbers of native prey, and where wildlife protection laws are irregularly enforced and access and safety for field personnel are concerns. The FWS would never target such an area in the U.S. for wolf recovery.

Reliance on the model is already proving problematic. Free-ranging Mexican wolves in Mexico are routinely fed artificially to promote survival by minimizing conflicts with livestock. Such "diversionary feeding" is required because of abundant livestock and relatively scarce wild prey, suggesting that the area is not suitable despite being identified as such by the habitat model. The shortcomings of the model will become even more apparent as biologists strive to expand recovery in Mexico, completing a record number of initial releases and monitoring



and managing wolves across millions of acres of private land necessary to support ≥ 200 animals.

Although the U.S. public supports wolf recovery, anti-wolf groups hold immense political influence in Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah. These groups were well served by the scientific gloss the habitat model gives to the recovery plan, and by the disastrous decision to exclude from it the high-quality habitat of the Grand Canyon and Southern Rockies ecoregions of northern Arizona/southern Utah and northern New Mexico/southern Colorado, respectively.

If politics demanded that FWS initially focus on marginal habitat in Mexico by adopting a habitat suitability model that discounts the importance of livestock and land ownership, then the agency should at least have defined a recovery region that also included these two ecoregions. Such an approach would have facilitated progress once the inevitable shortcomings of habitat in Mexico became undeniable to even the most ardent opponents to recovery. Failure to advance such a common-sense approach to recovery represents a

failure of science-informed planning and leadership by FWS simply for the sake of political expediency.

Much of the 2017 Mexican wolf recovery plan is based on the state's desire to assign to Mexico as much of the burden of Mexican wolf recovery as possible—not the best available science. It is worse than a poor replacement for the 1982 plan. Deeply discounting the cardinal role of wolf-livestock interactions and importance of land ownership ensures that FWS will waste precious time and millions of dollars, all the while failing to recover *Canis lupus baileyi*. ■

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