

Mexican Wolf Recovery Program Standard Operating Procedure (SOP)

Title: Mexican Wolf Population Monitoring and Location Information Dissemination Procedures

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Purpose: This SOP is intended to outline a population monitoring framework and accompanying reporting process to ensure consistency in disseminating location information for Mexican wolves. In addition, this SOP is intended to provide appropriate distinction between the more detailed information that is provided to directly affected entities and the more general information that is provided for broader (public) distribution. This SOP represents, in part, the “Service Approved Management Plan” referenced in the 2022 Revised Experimental Population Rule (2022 10(j) Rule, 50 CFR 17.84(k)).

Exceptions: The Freedom of Information Act, 5 U.S.C. Section 552 et seq. (FOIA), governs the release of information by the federal government. Nothing in this SOP is intended to contradict FOIA or obligate data sharing that is exempted by the FOIA. Data sharing agreements entered by lead agencies for scientific research are exempted from data sharing requirements outlined in this SOP. The Mexican Wolf Executive Committee Lead Agencies must approve any exceptions to this SOP.

In accordance with the Memorandum of Understanding for Mexican Wolf Recovery and Management, Lead Agencies have regulatory jurisdiction and management authority over Mexican wolves, and/or regulatory jurisdiction and management over the lands that Mexican wolves occupy in Arizona and New Mexico, and/or expertise in resolving conflicts between humans and wildlife, including threatened and endangered species. Lead Agencies include those Native American Tribes, Pueblos, and Nations that are managing for the recovery of Mexican wolves.

Background: Information on recent locations of Mexican wolves is an important management tool and is desired by multiple parties (e.g., governmental agencies, non-governmental agencies, politicians, livestock producers, and the public). Certain entities/stakeholders (e.g. grazing permittees) want to know where wolves are so, if necessary, appropriate measures can be taken to minimize contact between wolves and livestock. Others want such information so they can either seek out or avoid wolf-occupied areas during recreational outings. Mexican wolf location information has other legitimate management applications as well, but unrestricted distribution of location information may also lead to undesired consequences (e.g., efforts to locate and unlawfully take wolves). Per a federal court order, the 2022 Mexican Wolf Recovery Plan identified recovery actions to reduce the threat of human-caused mortality. Further efforts to reduce human-caused mortality may cause the Mexican Wolf Recovery Program (program) to place additional limitations or lag times on location data that are shared so that wolves are not exposed to greater risk of illegal take. The challenge to the program in managing and distributing wolf location information is the need to balance these main objectives:

1. Providing information in a way that protects the welfare of and furthers the recovery of wolves.
2. Providing information in a way that is useful and beneficial to affected parties (e.g., producers with the intent to proactively deter depredations by wolves and/or protect livestock from wolves).
3. Providing information in a way that is reasonable and sustainable to program, agencies, and personnel workload.

Mexican wolf location information is primarily obtained using GPS radio collars, which the Interagency Field Team (IFT) can program to specific schedules of location rates and upload intervals that can be viewed spatially on maps. The use of GPS collars has been successful both in terms of monitoring the wolf population, while also decreasing the need for field personnel to monitor wolves on the ground and/or air (e.g. telemetry flights).

Residents and other people occupying, frequenting, or utilizing the Mexican Wolf Experimental Population Area (MWEPA) are urged to assume that Mexican wolves are or might be present anywhere in the MWEPA because of the potential for uncollared wolves to be present but undetected. There are, however, portions of the MWEPA that are more likely to contain wolves than other areas. Information on measures that can minimize the possibility of undesirable wolf interactions with humans, livestock, and pets is available from the program at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) website. In addition, Wildlife Services has a nonlethal program to assist the public implementing measures to reduce conflict with wolves. Wildlife Services nonlethal program can be contacted at 1-866-487-3297. Lead federal agency personnel can also provide information on generalized wolf locations as outlined in the following procedures. State statutes and regulations prevent state agency personnel from releasing specific location information. Finally, it should be noted that GPS information is limited to GPS collared wolves and accompanying uncollared wolves.

Procedures:

1. Mexican Wolf Population Monitoring Objectives

- a. Wolves will be fitted with GPS collars (or other types of tracking collars/devices) that can be programmed and manipulated remotely to achieve the following monitoring objectives:
 - i. Obtain location information/data for all radio/GPS collared wolves in Arizona and New Mexico;
 - ii. Identify and attempt to classify non-collared wolves associated with collared wolves;
 - iii. Determine the status of collared wolves in the population; and
 - iv. Monitor survival, dispersal, new pack formation, expansion, home ranges, and areas occupied by Mexican wolves.
- b. Consistent with achieving these monitoring objectives, the IFT will implement wolf trapping and/or helicopter capture operations to maintain an appropriate distribution of GPS collars within the Mexican wolf population.
 - i. At present and to the extent that program managers deem practicable, the collaring goal is to maintain a GPS collar on two wolves per pack, with a

preference for breeding animals and surviving foster animals for genetic monitoring purposes.

2. Mexican Wolf Population Monitoring Schedules

- a. The frequency at which a GPS collar transmits and collects data directly impacts battery life, thus depleting the length of functionality of the radio collar with each location. The IFT has chosen a schedule to balance battery life with obtaining adequate information for routine monitoring.
- b. The primary schedule is 2 locations per day, uploaded every other day, with 12 hour per day VHF availability. Alternative schedules are available for specific management and research needs.
- c. As circumstances require and dictate, the IFT may perform telemetry flights (fixed-wing or helicopter) on an as-needed basis to address specific operational or program management needs.

3. IFT Reporting and Distribution of Monitoring and Location Information

- a. Although wolf packs tend to remain in certain areas (i.e., home ranges or territories), packs or individuals move freely and can disperse widely or make other long-distance movements over short periods of time. Information on wolf locations obtained through GPS collars uploads every other day, leading to a 48-hour (or longer in the event of a failed upload) delay in when the location fix was taken and when information is received. Thus, location information can become outdated within a very short time.
- b. Recognizing these dynamic conditions and accompanying limitations, the program currently posts an updated public Wolf Location Map (<https://arcg.is/bLyPO>) on the AGFD and USFWS websites every two weeks. The most recent wolf location is displayed as a 3.14 miles² (8.09 km²) hexagon, in which the location falls somewhere within that hexagon. The intent of this public map is to report wolf locations that:
 - i. Provides stakeholders with the independence to stay informed on wolf locations and movements;
 - ii. Spatially and temporally buffers locations to protect wolves;
 - iii. Removes the expectation of IFT personnel to provide phone calls to permittees and landowners of wolf locations, which had proved to be unsustainable and unrealistic to continue as the wolf population reaches recovery goals; and
 - iv. Provides location information in a way that minimizes unlawful take.

Note: per request by tribal authorities, wolf location information is not posted or otherwise made available to the public for any Tribe that may have wolves located on reservation lands.

4. IFT Reporting and Distribution of Related Information

- a. Distribution of information must comply with State and Federal laws. Both Arizona and New Mexico State laws prevent state agency personnel from releasing specific

- location information. Also, lead agency personnel cannot provide exact locations or other information that would potentially cause direct or indirect harm to Mexican wolves, lead to interference with management actions, or jeopardize personnel.
- b. Data sharing agreements entered by lead agencies for scientific research are outside the scope of this protocol.
 - c. In addition to the public location map, IFT members can provide more specific or more recent generalized wolf locations (e.g., referencing a nearby landmark such as a water tank or geographic feature) to individuals who are being directly affected by depredation or other nuisance wolf behavior as more fully described in the 2022 10(j) Rule. The IFT will increase communication to affected livestock producers following livestock depredations and affected members of the public regarding nuisance incidents through communication of generalized location information. IFT members are expected to be available to respond to inquiries from affected members of the public and to:
 - i. Communicate generalized wolf locations, which in these instances will be given through verbal or written descriptions via phone, email, or texts as outlined in 4.d. below.
 - ii. Update directly affected members of the public on nuisance incidents, depredations, or other problem behaviors involving wolves, pursuant to the 2022 10(j) Rule.
 - iii. Update directly affected members of the public on implementation of an approved control or management action.
 - d. To comply with the 2022 10(j) Rule and limit potential unlawful take of Mexican wolves, the following information shall not be shared outside the lead agency personnel:
 - i. Screenshots or photos of GPS locations from collared wolves via text or email. The subsequent redistribution of this information cannot be controlled and has been shared beyond the intended recipient in the past. Therefore, to protect the welfare of Mexican wolves from purposeful human-caused mortality, such information will not be shared with the public.
 - ii. Wolf GPS clusters (a grouping of several points across multiple days). This information may disclose the location of dens, rendezvous sites, or native ungulate kill sites, in addition to potential livestock kill sites. Consistent harassment at den, rendezvous, and native ungulate kill sites could impact Mexican wolf survival and reproduction by disrupting normal feeding behavior and sensitive pup rearing and could be considered as take under the ESA. Investigation of clustered locations where wolves are present by non-permitted personnel is not authorized by the 2022 10(j) Rule because it is purposeful harassment, rather than opportunistic, non-injurious harassment. Wolf GPS cluster locations or the information associated with GPS clusters may be shared in the following specific circumstances:
 - o Den/Rendezvous locations. Buffered location hexagons (3.14 miles² (8.09 km²), in which the location falls somewhere within

that hexagon) will be shared with the appropriate land management and livestock owners if the den or rendezvous site is on their grazing lease or private property. If further detail is needed for management purposes, more specific information may be shared with the land management agency to mitigate impacts to wolves (e.g., fires, logging operations, etc.)

- GPS clusters, which are not den or rendezvous areas, that wolves have been absent from for ≥ 3 days can be shared with livestock owners who are having active depredations (i.e., within the last month), if lead agency personnel are asked to provide the clusters to assist livestock owners with finding kill sites.
- iii. Coordinates of wolf locations. This information should not be shared outside of lead agency personnel.
- iv. Coordinates of food caches. When appropriate, we will coordinate the location of the food caches with the land management agency, private landowner and the affected permittees.

5. Guidelines for Terminating Distribution of Location Information

- a. The dissemination of wolf location information to affected stakeholders and/or the public may be suspended or terminated at any time for various reasons, including, but not limited to, if law enforcement officials deem such actions necessary to manage identified risks or to secure ongoing investigations involving Mexican wolves. In such circumstances, appropriate location information may still be provided to specific individuals (e.g., permittees and livestock owners) on an as-needed basis as approved by law enforcement officers, in appropriate detail and as timely as the situation allows. IFT Leaders for each agency will be responsible for coordinating directly with the appropriate law enforcement agency/lead in these situations to ensure appropriate/approved public distribution of location information.

Approvals: The Interagency Field Team developed this SOP, the Middle Management Team reviewed, and the Executive Committee and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s Mexican Wolf Recovery Coordinator approved on September 26, 2023.

References: None