



***For Immediate Release May 26, 2023***

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## **Conservationists celebrate lobo cross-fostering successes but concerns remain about genetic crisis and freeze on wolf family releases**

Phoenix, AZ – Conservationists and advocates are celebrating the [news of 16 Mexican gray wolf pups fostered into wild dens](#) in Arizona and New Mexico. However, concerns remain that more must be done to save the endangered Mexican gray wolf, or lobo.

“We are excited and encouraged by the increasing number of Mexican wolves in the wild and that additional pups are being cross-fostered, but continue to be concerned about the overreliance on cross-fostering and the failure to adequately consider and address the genetic needs of this highly endangered animal,” said Sandy Bahr, director for Sierra Club’s Grand Canyon (Arizona) Chapter. “The US Fish and Wildlife Service must act now to add the introduction of well-bonded families of wolves into the wild to address the genetic emergency and better aid recovery of Mexican wolves.”

Cross-fostering is an innovative and important technique for lobo recovery, but the fostered pups have to survive and raise families of their own in the wild to contribute meaningfully to long-term conservation. To date, 99 pups have been fostered from the Mexican Wolf Saving Species From Extinction (SAFE) breeding program, but only 14 have been documented as surviving to breeding age. While cross-fostering has contributed to improving gene diversity in the wild population, it is not sufficient to address the genetic crisis. Wild Mexican gray wolves are still about as related to each other as full siblings.

“Wolf pups are adorable and hopefully they will all grow up to become parents of pups of their own, though past results inform us that most will not”, said Mary Katherine Ray, Wildlife Chair for the Rio Grande Chapter of the Sierra Club. “Besides cross-fostering, it's time that wolf families are also released to more quickly contribute important genes

to the wild population. Relying on cross fostering alone is taking too long to address the looming threat that inbreeding poses to the future of this important species."

Lack of gene diversity must be addressed immediately and decisively to give lobos the best possible chance of avoiding extinction and maintaining their ability to adapt in a changing environment. Conservationists urge the US Fish and Wildlife Service to ensure that Mexican gray wolves have the resilience they need to roam the wild places where they belong for generations to come.

"While we welcome the news of the newly cross-fostered pups, the US Fish & Wildlife Service is still not releasing needed wolf families, largely in deference to Arizona and New Mexico state wildlife agencies and counter to wolf recovery science," said Wild Arizona's Executive Director Kelly Burke. "This has limited the presence and persistence of carefully preserved genetics which could have accompanied more productive family releases from the breeding program to the wild. Meanwhile, high human-caused mortality, artificial boundaries, and interference with wolves roaming freely in habitat of their choosing makes Mexican wolf recovery even more urgent."

Releasing well-bonded wolf families, parents with their pups, would immediately improve gene diversity, help wolves expand into new territories, and support the highly social nature of wolves. It would also ensure that the Mexican Wolf SAFE program has enough space to continue its critical work caring for the wolves in the breeding program.

Partners in the Mexican Wolf SAFE program, nonprofits like LightHawk Conservation, and biologists and technicians working on the ground have once again demonstrated how powerful collaboration can be when working to conserve endangered species. These efforts should also be backed up by policy changes and robust commitment from state leadership in Arizona and New Mexico and federal leaders in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and U.S. Forest Service to ensure lobos are protected wherever they may roam. Native carnivores like the Mexican gray wolf have an important role to play in the environment. Conservationists hope the partnership demonstrated during cross-fostering operations is honored and amplified beyond pup season.

## **Background**

The Mexican gray wolf is the southernmost subspecies of gray wolf in North America, and the most endangered. Exterminated from the wild in the United States and Mexico, seven unrelated wolves were successfully bred in captivity after the Mexican wolf was listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act in 1976. Reintroduction into Arizona and New Mexico began in 1998. The most recent annual census shows at least 241 Mexican gray wolves in the wild in the United States and fewer than 20 in Mexico, where reintroduction began in 2011.

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