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## Officials eye new locations for Mexican wolf release program

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This April 18, 2008, file photo provided by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife shows a gray wolf. (AP Photo/U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Gary Kramer, File)

Wildlife officials are working to identify new locations to release Mexican gray wolf packs that have been raised in captivity.

Federal forest and wildlife officials are looking at nine locations across the Sitgreaves and Tonto national forests as potential sites for wolf releases, The Arizona Daily Sun reported (<http://bit.ly/1Q5V2Jx>).

At a meeting earlier this month between wildlife officials and ranchers who have grazing leases on the land, some ranchers said they understand the need to protect the wolves, but new release areas bring them closer to cattle, roads and communities.

"Many of these folks have not had to deal with the (Mexican wolf recovery) program, so we're starting from square one," said Patrick Bray, executive vice president of the Arizona Cattle Growers' Association.

Officials with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service say the expanded release area is necessary because the original release area has no more space for wolves to establish territory.

"If you release wolves and they establish there, you can't continually put wolves on top of wolves," said Sherry Barrett, the Mexican wolf recovery coordinator at the Fish and Wildlife Service. "It was really constricting us on where we could put new wolves so we could get the genetics of the wild population more diverse."

An annual survey released last week by the Fish and Wildlife Service shows at least 97 wolves are spread among forested lands in southwestern New Mexico and southeast Arizona.

The population had been on the upswing since 2010, with 2014 marking a banner year when the predators topped 110 after seeing an increase of nearly a third in their numbers.

The Mexican wolf was added to the federal endangered species list in 1976. Wildlife officials are working to expand the wolf release zone as part of changes made last year to the regulations on how Mexican wolves are managed.

With the rule change, wildlife officials said they expect to release 28 to 40 packs, each with an adult pair and several pups, into the wild over the next 20 years.

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