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May 20, 2016

The Honorable Daniel M. Ashe
Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife
Department of the Interior
1849 C St., NW
Washington, D.C. 20240

Dear Director Ashe,

I write today to express my support for the settlement agreement recently reached by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), the states of Arizona and Utah, and conservation groups, which will lead to development of a long overdue recovery plan for the Mexican wolf (*Canis lupus baileyi*). I also urge you to ensure that this new recovery effort is not hampered by the same political considerations that have kept the species from increasing its numbers and returning to its native range in the American Southwest. I recognize and appreciate the challenges associated with the Mexican wolf program, but the Endangered Species Act (ESA) charges you with protecting and recovering wildlife that has value to all Americans, even when critics seek to drown out science and the will of the people.

On November 13, 2015, the Governors of Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado and Utah sent you a letter opposing Mexican wolf recovery anywhere north of Interstate 40. The overriding issue in the Governors' letter, in the press, and now on Capitol Hill, is the extent of the Mexican wolf's historic range. The states' position -- that 90% of the Mexican wolf's historic range occurred in Mexico and that recovery efforts should focus there -- is erroneous and has no basis in science. The most recent data draw a much larger historic range for the Mexican wolf, extending it into Utah and Colorado, and even the Service's widely-accepted depiction in the 1996 Environmental Impact Statement puts approximately 40 percent of the wolf's historic range in the United States. In your March 15, 2016 congressional testimony on the 2017 budget, you noted correctly that Mexican wolves "probably ranged up into and intermixed with what we now call Rocky mountain wolves."

It is critical that recovery of ESA-listed species is based on the best available science, which indicates that FWS should go beyond the states' suggested narrow boundaries to recover the Mexican wolf. The Recovery Planning Team, and its Science and Planning Subteam convened by FWS in 2011, drafted a recovery plan based on a peer-reviewed modeling that showed at least two additional populations, of at least 200 animals each, must be established within dispersal distance of the current population located in the Apache and Gila National Forests in Eastern Arizona/Western New Mexico. A total of at least 750 wolves would be necessary for recovery, with dispersal among the three populations. The Subteam found two suitable locations for new core populations of wolves within dispersal distance of the current population, with ample habitat and prey and the low human and road densities necessary for wolf persistence: in the Grand Canyon ecoregion and in Northern New Mexico/Southern Colorado. The Subteam found that conditions for establishing additional populations in Mexico are suboptimal at this time.

Some in the region and in Congress have ignored this science, and called for restrictions that would surely prevent recovery activities from succeeding. FWS' best response is rigorous, independent, peer review of the science behind the recovery plan, such as that done by the National Center for Ecological Analysis and Synthesis on the gray wolf delisting proposal. By committing to such a review early in the process, FWS communicates clearly to all stakeholders that it will uphold the ESA's mandate on best available science. FWS should also consider utilizing members of the aforementioned Science and Planning Subteam as an ongoing scientific advisory group throughout development of the plan, and establishing a group of advisors from the stakeholder community, such as conservationists, sportsmen, ranchers and community leaders.

Please give these requests due consideration and act on them expeditiously. These steps will guarantee the independence and objectivity necessary for the Service's Mexican wolf experts to do their work, and will ensure that the Mexican gray wolf recovery plan is based on the best available science. The politicization of science is a serious issue in its own right, and in this case it threatens the recovery of a critically endangered species. Thank you for your attention to this matter. If you have any questions, please have your staff contact Matt Strickler on the Natural Resources Committee Democratic Staff at (202) 225-6065. I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Raúl M. Grijalva
Ranking Member
Committee on Natural Resources