



Contact

Diane Tilton, 928-532-3691
Public Information Officer, AGFD

Arizona Game and Fish Department

NEWS RELEASE

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Flight operations to begin for Mexican wolf population survey

PINETOP, AZ — Residents of Alpine, AZ and Reserve, N.M. and surrounding areas may notice several daily flights of a low-flying helicopter over their communities in the latter part of January as biologists working on the Mexican wolf reintroduction project conduct their annual wolf population survey and capture. The Reintroduction Project is a multi-agency cooperative effort between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Arizona Game and Fish Department (department), USDA Forest Service, USDA-Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, Wildlife Services and the White Mountain Apache Tribe.

The aerial operation is scheduled to run Jan. 19- Feb. 3, weather permitting. Survey flights will occur on the Fort Apache Indian Reservation, on the Apache and Gila National Forests in eastern Arizona and western New Mexico, and possibly on some areas immediately outside the forests.

As part of the survey operation, biologist will attempt to capture some of the wild-born wolves in the populations that have not yet been fitted with a radio telemetry collar, those having a collar that needs a battery replacement, or any wolf appearing to be sick or injured. Captures are made with a tranquilizer dart or net gun operated by a biologist aboard the helicopter. The wolf is immobilized and brought by air to a staging area in Springerville for processing and any necessary veterinary care. It is then returned to the Mexican Wolf Experimental Population Area and released.

“Because we get calls and questions on this each year, we want the public to be aware of these daily flights, and that there’s no cause for concern,” says Jeff Dolphin, wolf team leader for the department. “Due to capture procedure, the helicopter flies with the doors off, despite being cold.”

Dolphin notes that the field team has already contacted private landowners for permission to land on their property to capture a wolf, if necessary, and has coordinated with land management agencies and county sheriff offices on survey operation details.

“This annual survey and capture operation is quite important in determining and evaluating the overall population status of Mexican wolves,” says Dolphin. “It charts progress in documenting the wolf population in the southwest, and it helps us know how these animals are using the recovery area.”

Results of the survey will be made available to the public in February by a news release and a posting on the department’s website at <http://www.azgfd.gov/wolf>.

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