Five years ago, federal biologists began to introduce endangered Mexican gray wolves in remote mountains near the Arizona-New Mexico border, half a century after the end of concerted campaigns to wipe them out. Wolf pairs have been added over the years, with a goal of establishing a population of 100 wild wolves. But now someone is killing them.

There are 24 wolves living in the wild in the Southwest. But nearly that many, at least 22, have died under "suspicious circumstances," investigators say, since the program began. Six have been killed in the past two months, three by gunshot and three by cars.

Curtis Graves, the special agent with the federal Fish and Wildlife Service who is responsible for the wolf cases, is reluctant to assign a motive. He said the shootings could be a result of confusion by hunters who thought they were lawfully killing coyotes. But neither he nor local ranchers rule out the possibility that some ranchers may be shooting wolves to protect their cattle.

"If the wolves continue to be dumped in here and continue to destroy people's way of life in the cattle industry," said Sam Luce, a rancher in Blue, Ariz., "people are going to defend themselves."

The reintroduction effort has been plagued by other problems. Officials say they are frustrated by political constraints. One rule says that if the wolves stray out of the recovery boundaries, they must be trapped and released somewhere else. One such boundary divides the White Mountain Apache Reservation, where wolves are welcome, from the San Carlos Apache Reservation to the south, where they are not. The border is obvious on a map, but indistinguishable on the ground, most of all to wolves.

"You can't manage wolves based on boundaries," said Paul Overy, the Arizona Game and Fish Department field team leader. "Their whole nature is to disperse."

Some say the bigger problem is money.

"This administration is literally strangling the Fish and Wildlife Service to stop endangered species programs," said Craig Miller, Southwest director for Defenders of Wildlife, an environmental group.

On the wolf project, budget cuts have resulted in position cuts, mostly in law enforcement. As patrols have dried up, shootings have risen. Mr. Graves acknowledges that his agency has not solved a single case since 1998. He said the strain of the project had caused turnover among agency personnel. Mr. Graves himself is leaving, next month, for a job that has nothing to do with Mexican gray wolves.

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