

AP Photo/U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Jim Clark, File)

This undated file image provided by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service shows a Mexican gray wolf leaving cover at the Seviellta National Wildlife Refuge, north of Socorro, N. M.

Wolf country: Ranchers fighting comeback of a predator that's good for the land

by **Linda Valdez** - May. 22, 2008 07:17 PM
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BLUE RANGE WOLF RECOVERY AREA - The controversy over the reintroduction of the Mexican gray wolf to the Southwest isn't really about wolves and cows.

This is a landlord-tenant dispute.

The public land is yours. Ranchers lease it to feed their cattle. The federal government, as your rental agent, is supposed to look after your interests.

Yet a decade after a launching a wolf-reintroduction program with strong support from the non-ranching public, wolf numbers are down and a lot of ranchers say there isn't room on the federal land for cattle and wolves.

The logical response would be to move out the cows.

But that's not what's happening. Instead, increasing numbers of wolves are being taken off your land. Environmentalists say it's because Uncle Sam acts like he's working for the tenants, not the landowners. They say that the ranchers have an unfair advantage and that the result will be the second extermination of the wolf in the Southwest.

New Mexico rancher Alan Tackman disagrees. Much as he'd like to see wolves go away, he thinks they are here to stay. He says that's what isn't fair.

We shared lunch at the Alma Cafe, which sits along a stretch of U.S. 180 in New Mexico in the tiny community of Alma, about an hour's drive north of Silver City. Tackman says his ranch lost \$20,000 last year because wolves ate his calves. He just can't prove it to the satisfaction of Defenders of Wildlife, which runs a compensation program that requires physical evidence of wolf depredation. Tackman counts his losses in the decreased numbers of calves at roundup time. Defenders doesn't pay for that.

Tackman's Deep Creek Ranch has been in the family for 36 years. It includes 200 acres of his own land and a permit to run his cow-and-calf operation on 28,000 acres of public land.

"All ranches here are dependent on federal land," he says.

Which is why this is a landlord-tenant dispute.

Consider what would happen if your landlord had a dog that chased your cat. You would either keep the cat away from the dog or move. You wouldn't expect the landlord to compensate you for kitty's inconvenience.

Unless you were a rancher.

If your landlord decided not to renew your lease because she had other uses for the property, you wouldn't expect compensation.

Unless you were a rancher.

Ranchers got used to being treated like a favorite nephew of their Uncle Sam.

Wolves were shot, trapped and poisoned nearly to extinction at federal expense for the convenience of ranchers. It happened in an era when a lot of the West didn't appear to be good for much and the value of predators was not understood. Getting a few dollars in exchange for letting ranchers run their cattle across public land looked like a good deal.

These days, people see public land as priceless and irreplaceable. In a fast-paced, multitasking society, public land has vast potential for recreation on a physical, emotional and spiritual level.

Predators are seen differently, too.

Biologists now understand that wolves benefit the ecosystem in unexpected ways.

In Yellowstone National Park, for example, the reintroduction of timber wolves resulted in a resurgence of willows and cottonwoods along streams. Why? Because without wolves, the elk got used to congregating in large numbers near the water. They would hang out for hours and eat or trample the vegetation. When wolves returned, the elk reverted to more natural behavior. They dispersed and became wary. This allowed the vegetation to take hold.

Now, these plant-rich stream sides offer better cover for eagles, beavers, foxes and weasels, says David R. Parsons, who ran the Mexican wolf-recovery program for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service from 1990 to 1999. He is currently a carnivore-conservation biologist with the Rewilding Institute.

Mexican gray wolves

Mexican gray wolves are smaller than timber wolves and well-adapted to the challenges of our arid landscapes and its prey.

Biologically speaking, your public land is healthier if there are wolves on it.

This may cause discomfort for long-time tenants.

Tackman says several neighboring ranchers sold out because of the wolves, and he's worried about his future.

"I don't know how long we can stay in business," he says.

I like Tackman. But I don't owe him a living. It's not my responsibility, as a taxpayer and part owner of the public land, to keep somebody in a business who appears to be in direct conflict with the public will.

Under the Endangered Species Act, which reflects the will of the people, the Mexican gray wolf should get first-class protection. Under special provisions of the wolf's recovery plan that were written largely to placate ranchers, Mexican wolves became a second-class endangered species.

The wolves that were reintroduced into the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area in eastern Arizona and western New Mexico are classified as part of an "experimental, non-essential" population. That makes them easier to kill if they cause trouble for ranchers. They must be caught and relocated if they wander outside the boundaries of a recovery area that appears too small to accommodate them.

But even this remarkable level of accommodation hasn't satisfied the anti-wolf faction.

Consider Sharon Stewart. When I met her, she wore a blue sweatshirt that showed a wolf through the sights of a gun.

Like Tackman, she uses the public land to make a living. Stewart cooks and wrangles for hunting outfitters who organize trips onto public land. These expeditions serve people who are willing to pay thousands of dollars for the chance to take

down a male elk with a big rack of antlers.

Wolves are eating elk and hurting business, she says. She wants them gone.

Of course, unlike human hunters, wolves don't kill the best animal in the herd. Wolves actually improve the quality of the animals they prey upon by culling out the weak and sick. Hunters should appreciate that.

What's more, there are other kinds of outfitters.

Joe Saenz runs WolfHorse Outfitters out of Santa Clara, N.M. He is a Chiricahua Apache and offers customized outdoor experiences from a Native American perspective. His clients come from all over the world, but his business does not depend on taking something away from the public land. It depends on what's there.

His clients want to hear the wolves. Until recently, they usually did.

"In the last three years," he says, "you don't hear them as much."

What's the cost of a howl not heard?

"Without the wolf, the environment is out of balance," Saenz says, "it's sick."

In the past 10 years, 91 captive-bred Mexican gray wolves have been released, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Only about 50 remain in the wild.

It's not because wolves didn't do well. From a biologist's point of view, they have been enormously successful. They reproduced, formed packs and quickly learned to take down natural prey. From 1998 to 2001, a team including researchers from the University of Arizona and the Fish and Wildlife Service looked at wolf droppings to see what the animals were eating. They found that 89 percent of the Mexican gray wolf's diet consisted of elk, deer and other native ungulates. About 4 percent came from cattle.

Four percent.

According to official statistics, 142 wolves have been removed from the wild in the past 10 years by the agency in charge of their recovery. Seventy of them were captured or killed because of conflicts with ranchers.

Forty-nine percent.

And things are getting worse.

SOP 13.0

In the early years of the program, the number of wolves removed for livestock depredation was mostly in the low single digits. After a rule called Standard Operating Procedure 13.0 was finalized in 2005, the number of wolves removed hit double digits and kept climbing.

Terry Johnson, chair of the multiagency Mexican Wolf Adaptive Management Oversight Committee, says the group is recommending "substantial" revisions to procedures.

Johnson, a wildlife biologist for the Arizona Game and Fish Department, has been part of the wolf recovery since the beginning and shows a deep commitment to seeing wolves re-establish themselves in the Southwest. But since the beginning, wildlife biologists have struggled with a mandate to recover wolves in a way that would appease or compensate ranchers, something that looks increasingly impossible.

Environmentalists condemn the revisions proposed by Johnson's committee, which includes representation from the game and fish departments of Arizona and New Mexico, the White Mountain Apache Tribe, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Forest Service and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. They say the agency just "tinkered" with the rule.

Environmental groups are suing in federal court to stop SOP 13.0.

A look at the committee's proposed changes to SOP 13.0 and its companion SOP 11.0 suggests those closest to the recovery program are trying to address the problem.

Currently, the rules require a wolf to be removed from the wild or killed if it preys on cattle three times in one year. Under the proposed revisions, that wouldn't be automatic. Wolf managers could consider the circumstances. For example, if there is evidence that wolves were baited, the depredation would not count against the wolf. There have been allegations that ranchers have lured wolves into preying on cattle, either actively or simply by failing to remove carcasses of cows that died of other causes.

This is an important point. Wolves that scavenge on cattle carcasses become habituated to eating beef. Back in 2001, a review of the wolf-reintroduction program recommended that ranchers be required to dispose of carcasses for that reason. It didn't happen.

Tackman says removing carrion would be totally impractical in a ranch like his because of the rough country.

He is willing to try some other management techniques.

He's participating in a pilot being run by a group called Mexican Wolf Fund. In exchange for \$5,000, he agreed to round up cows that are about to give birth and keep mother and baby corralled until the baby is 4 weeks old. This is supposed to keep the most vulnerable cattle out of the wolves' way.

'Just a snack for a wolf'

Tackman isn't too optimistic. He says the 4-week-old calves will return to the range as "just a snack for a wolf." Yet he's willing to give it a chance. That's why he's known as a "moderate," which isn't necessarily a compliment in these parts.

He also likes an alternative to the current Defenders of Wildlife compensation program that has been talked about for several years. The brain child of Benjamin Tuggle, regional director for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the idea is to set up a privately managed fund that would provide incentives to ranchers who tolerate wolves. It would also offer compensation based on decreases in a ranch's bottom line, rather than the kind of physical evidence Defenders requires.

Tackman likes Tuggle's idea. But he says some of his fellow ranchers think it amounts to being paid "to feed the wolves." They find that unacceptable.

Ranchers unsatisfied with both appeasement and compensation should take their cows off the public land.

After all, as Michael J. Robinson of the Center for Biological Diversity says, "I was never compensated for all those years of hiking and backpacking when I didn't hear a wolf."

Beyond the benefits they provide to the ecosystem, wolves add value to the land.

Jackie Blurton has been running the KOA Kampground in Silver City for 16 years. She says a population of wolves in the area would be a good tourism draw. Her guests, who come from all over the United States, as well as Europe and Canada, "want the opportunity to hear wolves."

Often called the most endangered wolf in the world, the Mexican gray wolf has cachet. Create an overlook where city folks can drive out at night and hear these rare wolves howl, and you've got a marketable commodity.

An avid hiker in the Gila Wilderness, Blurton says she has been in wolf country many times and was never afraid. She thinks ranchers could share the land with wolves if they wanted to.

"What they really don't want to do is manage their herds," she says.

They don't have to. Your land managers don't make them.

Robinson took me on a tour through an area of New Mexico's Gila National Forest that he calls the epicenter of wolf-cattle conflicts. Nineteen wolves were removed last year for livestock depredation from country where hills of yellow grass roll out to distant horizons and rise up to pine-covered mountains.

We drove on Forest Service Road 150, which is a curvy, bumpy testament to the unintended consequences of the old ways

of managing your public lands.

That road cuts through the Gila Primitive Area, which became the nation's first wilderness in 1924. It was supposed to remain a roadless preserve. But the eradication of wolves and other predators led to an explosion of the deer population. In the early 1930s, the Forest Service cut a road through the wilderness to allow hunters to get in and shoot some deer.

Robinson's book, *Predatory Bureaucracy: The Extermination of the Wolves and the Transformation of the West*, says this is how the eastern third of the original 755,000-acre primitive area was lopped off and subsequently renamed the Aldo Leopold Wilderness.

Rancher and wolf advocate Gene Simon explains it this way: "When man messes around with nature, he really messes it up good."

Simon's Rancho del Rio is the third and smallest ranch he has run in his 34 years in the Mimbres Valley near Silver City. At age 90-something, he has downsized from the 675 to 700 head of cattle he used to run to fewer than 100. But his attitude hasn't changed. He never allowed anyone on his ranches to kill predators, and he never had a problem with predators taking his cattle. His ranch isn't within the wolf-recovery area, but it is close and he says he'd welcome wolves. Simon is skeptical when ranchers claim huge losses to wolves.

"The losses could be managed if they ran their operation in compatible country," says Simon, whose ranches have all relied on large tracts of public land. "A lot of public land is not viable for ranching. Ranching will never be economically profitable on some of that land."

As landowner of the public land, you need to think about that.

It may be fair to compensate tenants of the public land who are willing to accommodate the public's desire to put wolves back in the ecosystem. Subsidizing ranches for old-time's sake would preserve a culture that is part of the West's heritage.

It is necessary to issue eviction notices to ranchers who can't get past their old entitlement mentality and cooperate with their landlord's new plan for public land.

Reach the writer at linda.valdez@arizonarepublic.com

More on this topic

- [Slideshow: Wolves in the southwest](#)

Canis lupus baileyi

Population: About 50.

Size: 68 to 80 pounds, about the size of a German shepherd dog.

Characteristics: Impressive head with short, thick muzzle. Tail usually has dark tip. Raises its mane, or hackles, when assuming a threat posture. Richly colored coat of buff, gray, rust and black.

Communication: Vocalizations include barks, howls, growls, whines and whimpers. Howls assemble pack members and advertise territory. Individuals have distinctive howls.

Diet: Deer, elk, pronghorns, rabbits, rodents, javelinas and occasionally livestock.

Group: Mexican wolf pack typically consists of three to eight individuals, with a hierarchy of a top, or alpha, male and female.

Habitat/range: Habitat includes desert scrub, grassland valleys and wooded areas. Will travel through desert but not remain there. Historic range was from western Texas, southern New Mexico, central Arizona and northern Mexico.

Source: southwestwildlife.org

Changing the rules

The rules require a wolf to be removed from the wild or killed if it preys on cattle three times in one year. Under the proposed revisions, that wouldn't be automatic.

Read the proposal at: http://www.azgfd.gov/w_c/es/wolf_reintroduction.shtml. Public comment will be accepted

until June 25 at mexwolf@azgfd.gov or Mexican Wolf Project: Comment on SOPs, Attention: Terry B. Johnson, 5000 W. Carefree Highway, Phoenix, AZ 85086).