



Catron County sends wolf petition to Salazar

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The Catron County Commission on Nov. 4 sent to U.S. Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar a response and comments to a petition to list the Mexican gray wolf, *Canis lupus baileyi*, as an endangered subspecies or distinct population segment. The petition to list the wolf as fully endangered was filed Aug. 11 by the Center for Biological Diversity out of Tucson, Ariz.

The Catron County Commission is opposed to the reclassification of listing or designation as a distinct population as requested by CBD, the county petition states. Commissioners allege that the CBD's proposals are contrary to the success of any wolf recovery program.

The commission suggests that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service should either delist the Mexican gray wolf or continue to treat it as a non-essential experimental population, because a change in the listing status of the wolf is not justified nor is a critical habitat designation warranted under the factors set forth in the Endangered Species Act, Section 4(a)(1).

According to the commission petition, "the FWS should work in cooperation and coordination with local governments in the affected Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area and adjacent properties where Mexican gray wolves may range.' The BRWRA is defined by the boundaries of the Apache National Forest in Arizona and New Mexico and the Gila National Forest in New Mexico. According to the CBD petition, the wolves range within the two national forests, as well as the adjacent Fort Apache Indian Reservation.

The CBD petition states: "The reintroduction program, while intended to correct a historic mistake and save an endangered species and the ecosystems of which it is a part, has not been wholly successful. The wolves have proven successful at hunting natural prey, establishing home territories, reproducing and raising pups. But the reintroduction program and the wolves' chances of success have been undermined by excessive removal of wolves and a failure to take measures to prevent conflicts between wolves and livestock. As a result, the wild population suffers from low numbers, unnaturally limited distribution, inbreeding-depression, reduced breeding success, and a population decline since 2003.

"In sum, absent the benefits of listing the Mexican wolf as endangered, the recovery efforts on behalf of the subspecies have proven inadequate to conserve it and the ecosystems on which it depends. This subspecies should therefore be returned to listed status under the ESA.'

The commission petition counters that "the retention of the rural landscape is beneficial to the recovery from extinction of the Mexican gray wolf. The area was chosen for the recovery area in large measure because of its low population density. That population density is closely tied to the rural, ranching and agricultural economy of the region. As such, the rural lifestyle, culture and economy are significant factors in the recovery program. The economic and socioeconomic impacts of listing are likely to actually be detrimental to the wolf habitat by increasing development and population in the recovery area. Therefore, the FWS should consider these interests with regard to any proposed change in listing status.

"In addition, the affected counties in the recovery area represent some of the poorest counties in the country, where the populations are predominantly minority,' according to the commission comments. "These minority cultures have traditions and language dating back to the earliest inhabitants of the area, and loss of the historic cultures and languages of the minorities is as damaging to the ecological and social landscape as would be the extinction of the Mexican gray wolf.'

The CBD alleges that habitat without livestock or with very low livestock numbers creates the most secure habitat for wolves, "given the historical and current pattern of scapegoating wolves that depredate.'

The CBD states that habitats that do not offer easy vehicular access are also favorable for wolf survival.

The commission seems to concur when it states that “if you assume that CBD is correct and increased human development is a threat to wolf habitat, then the best scenario for wolf habitat is for the private property adjacent to the recovery area to continue to be held in large, undeveloped, agricultural tracts and the economy to continue to have an agricultural/hunting/ ranching basis. The grazing allotments and travel within the forest for uses such as woodcutting and gathering, hunting and recreation are necessary to maintain the rural economy and landscape of the region, as well as to preserve the cultural integrity of the minority and poor inhabitants.’

However, the commission alleges that if the CBD “is making the argument that the entire Mexican gray wolf habitat should be free of people, livestock and roads, the real world result of such efforts is to destroy the rural economic nature of the region, and actually increase the human population by changing the development trend of the region. This trend is demonstrated by the fact that approximately 85 subdivisions have been developed in Catron County since the wolf began to be released in 1998, and at least four ranching operations have been permanently lost’ because of wolf depredation on livestock, thereby depriving ranchers of their livelihood.

The FWS should consider the landscape of the entire environment and ecosystem, including the human influence, the commission petition states. FWS should consider the effects the loss of the limited human development that exists in these areas and the loss of grazing will ultimately have on wolf habitat. In its 2008 Mexican Wolf Conservation Assessment, the FWS acknowledged that “the social and economic facets of gray wolf recovery are recognized as equally important.’

“Any program to benefit the wolf must work more closely with the ranching and agricultural community,’ the commission petition states. “In order to preserve the wolf habitat, FWS and the recovery program should enhance and encourage the rural economy of the region. The ultimate recovery of the wolf depends on the survival of the ranches and rural economy as much as any other factor.’

At the time of reintroduction, according to the commission petition, “the FWS said that a low road density of approximately one mile of road per square mile of area was recommended for wolf habitat, and that the road density in the recovery area was estimated at .8 roads per square mile.’

Throughout the wolf program documentation, it has been noted that the recovery area was chosen because of certain traits that are favorable to wolf habitat — namely open areas, low road density and low population density. But since the reintroduction began, the program itself has contributed to a significant change in these conditions. “The recovery program, in this respect, is self-defeating. The proposals made by CBD have the same self-defeating quality,’ according to the commission comments. Given the number of livestock predations that have been documented by Catron County since 1998, cattle have contributed significantly to the success of the Mexican gray wolf to date, the commission states. While the predation numbers are not acceptable, “there is not one single instance of a cow killing a wolf. The cattle are not a threat to the wolves. The threat arises in the context of illegal takes, and authorized takes as a result of livestock predation.’ Since maintenance of the ranches and agricultural lifestyle and economy is essential to the maintenance of wolf habitat, the FWS must seek ways to work with the cattle owners to assure that the ranching operations and the recovery program can co-exist.

The CBD states in its petition that “the Mexican gray wolf qualifies as a distinct population segment,’ because it is “discrete’ in “relation to the remainder of the species to which it belongs’ and “significant’ to the species to which it belongs.

The commission alleges that “data compiled early in the recovery program indicated that the Aragon lineage of the wolves put into the recovery area might have originated by breeding with a ‘North American’ wolf.’ Therefore the Mexican gray wolf is not discrete or significant.

As pointed out in the FWS 2008 Conservation Assessment, the recovery program has eliminated and reduced most of the threats to the wolf. The remaining threats — inbreeding depression and wolf removals/mortalities — will not be solved by giving the Mexican gray wolf an endangered or threatened designation, the commission alleges.

It has been repeatedly pointed out by proponents and critics of the recovery program that the existing recovery plan from 1982 lacks objective and measurable criteria for recovery of the species. Further, the 1998 10(j) Rule notes that FWS failed to submit the recovery proposal to local governments due to “legal, budget, staff and time considerations.’

“These deficiencies in the recovery plan should not be used as a basis to change the listing of the Mexican gray wolf,’ the commission states. “Instead, the FWS should address the pertinent issues that are both hindering the program and creating significant, negative impacts on the surrounding communities and residents.’