



## **Wolf program discussed at LIWNRC meeting**

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**By MARY ALICE MURPHY**

Special to the Press The Legislative Interim Water and Natural Resources Committee held its monthly meeting at the Grant County business/conference center all day Monday and until noon today.

The senators and representatives heard information on various issues, including the wolf program and how it is impacting Catron County. A representative of the Center of Biological Diversity also addressed the issue.

State Rep. Rudy Martinez and Silver City Mayor James Marshall welcomed the group to Silver City. County Commissioner Christy Miller explained that the building the meeting was being held in belongs to the county and is being developed as a business and conference center.

Catron County Commission Chairman Ed Wehrheim said he knows most people have already formed opinions on the wolf program, but wanted to present new developments.

"The program has now cost taxpayers about \$400,000 per wolf," Wehrheim said. "We estimate that when the program reaches its goal population of 100 wolves, we will lose about 7,000 head of cattle over five years. Our state is 48th in the U.S. in per capita income, and Catron County is the third lowest in the state in per capita income."

He reported that since the program went into effect, 1,200 head have been killed and only 72 compensated for by the Defenders of Wildlife.

"Clearly this program is stealing our private property," Wehrheim said.

The Center for Biological Diversity has sent a petition to the U.S. secretary of the interior requesting the Mexican graywolf status be changed from an experimental, non-essential program to full endangered status as a subspecies of the gray wolf or as a distinct population segment.

"That means there will be road and trail closures, no hunting, no woodcutting, no ranching and the recovery area will be expanded," Wehrheim alleged. "We commissioners took an oath of office to protect the health and safety of our citizens. These are public lands for everyone to use and enjoy, not just the Center for Biological Diversity for their use. They are trying to blame the failure of the program on the citizens. To have groups who are above the law is unconstitutional and very un-American."

"We, the ranchers, are the true environmentalists and believe in preserving the land for future generations,' Wehrheim said.

Rep. Don Tripp asked Wehrheim if problem wolves trapped in Arizona are removed to New Mexico.

Wehrheim explained that the program rules call for a wolf to be removed from an area after it has three "strikes" — depredations — on it. He said some have been relocated to New Mexico, but "now two packs in our county have more than three strikes on them. The Middle Fork Pack is on the Adobe/Slash Ranch.

"Two days ago, it had eight strikes,' Wehrheim said. "Hazers were sent out, but they made it worse. Now the wolves are eating the livestock alive. The cows are still alive, but their hindquarters have been eaten out, and they have to be put down. The wolves come back the next night and do it again.

"The wolves are not being removed because they have important genetics for the program,' Wehrheim continued, "but too many are not genetically pure. The program is saying 52 wolves are in the wild, but we all know there are more than that. In several packs, there are one or two collared wolves, but the wolves are getting well out of the recovery area.'

Tripp asked about the compensation program for livestock losses.

"Without payment forthcoming (from the Defenders of Wildlife),' Wehrheim said, "most ranchers are not submitting their requests. We hired wolf inspector Jess Carey, and he casts tracks, protects evidence, skins a carcass and measures the bite marks. Usually one of the Interagency Field Team members goes with him, so both verify it.

"By IFT estimates, for every kill that is proven to have been a wolf kill, there are probably six more,' Wehrheim said.

Rep. Paul Bundy asked where the critical habitat is, as sought by the Center for Biological Diversity petition.

"From the Mexican border to Interstate 40,' Wehrheim alleged.

Sen. Clinton Harden asked about who "they' are in Wehrheim's explanations.

Wehrheim said "they' are the agencies, including the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the New Mexico Game and Fish Department, which are in partnership on the wolf recovery program.

Harden asked if any state funding is used in the program.

Legislative Interim Water and Natural Resources Committee Chairman Sen. Phil Griego said Game and Fish receives some funding from the state, but "I don't know how it is earmarked.'

Harden also asked about the school bus shelters that have been built to protect children.

Wehrheim said they were built after wolves were tracked following students home from school.

"When you bring it to people's attention who don't live here, they call you liars,' Harden said.

According to Wehrheim, the county has hundreds of photos and tapes, and “we’re not making them up.’ He alleged that the catalyst for how the program is managed is the environmental groups, such as the CBD of Tucson, Ariz., and Wild Earth Guardians of Albuquerque.

Harden said: “Enough is enough. I’m getting angst listening to this and never anything is done about it. I don’t want to see wolves in Raton.’

Wolves will soon be introduced into Mexico, Wehrheim said. “ When they come across the border, they will be fully endangered, and we will have no recourse to shoot them if they’re killing pets or livestock. Sixty miles is nothing for a wolf.’

Sen. Rod Adair asked that the groups such as the CBD not be called environmentalists, “ which is a compliment. I call them anti-science groups.’

Rep. Candy Spence Ezzell asked if the horse population has been impacted. She also asked about the deer population.

Although there have been horse depredations, Wehrheim did not think the horse population has declined. He said the area has seen “ a lot more deer in the past two years. The wolves cannot live in the wild, but can survive if they have cattle. Wolves will hang around what water is left and will kill whatever shows up.’

Sen. Peter Wirth noted that “ there are two sides to every issue.’ He asked permission to call Michael Robinson of the Center for Biological Diversity to hear what he had to say.

Griego cautioned that it would not be a debate, but only providing information.

Robinson said he is the author of the petition to have the Mexican gray wolf named as an endangered species with full protection. He refuted Wehrheim’s claim that the status change will stop hunting or woodcutting.

“ The Mexican gray wolf is now part of the gray wolves across the country,’ Robinson said, “ except, because it is a non-essential population, there is no end point where it could be taken off the endangered list.’

As for compensation, Congress has recently passed a law permitting federal payment for livestock losses, although “the rules and regulations haven’t been set.’

The Mexican gray wolf has been on the ground since 1998. Planning for the program started in the 1970s, he said.

He alleged that most of the \$400,000 per wolf has been spent on trapping and shooting and “ does not benefit the wolves. The conservationist point of view is usually ignored by officials.’

Where the Middle Fork Pack is now, six other packs have been removed by Fish and Wildlife from the same area, he said.

“ It is confirmed that wolves feed on carcasses,' Robinson said. “ But this spring, I found 16 carcasses near Beaverhead. The wolves have been drawn to depredate. Two scientific agencies have proven that they are drawn to carcasses.'

Ranchers should be required to remove carcasses, he said.

A recent survey showed that 69 percent of those who replied support the reintroduction of the wolf and only 19 percent oppose it, according to Robinson.

“ We make our cases based on science, and that's why we prevail ( in lawsuits),' Robinson said.

The USFWS has statutory authority over the program, but other agencies include the NMGFD, the U. S. Department of Agriculture, the Arizona Game and Fish Department and USDA Wildlife Services.

Wehrheim said four ranchers left Catron County last year, and four more are likely to leave this year, due to wolf depredation.

Adair asked where the Defenders of Wildlife get the money to offer compensation.

Robinson replied that he believes the money comes from memberships. Compensation is based on whether the kill is confirmed by the USDA Wildlife Services, and sometimes it's a full payment and other times half.

“ The livestock industry already get subsidies from the federal government,' Robinson said. “ Grazing on public land is a privilege, not a right.'

Bundy said because he is constrained from taking motorized vehicles into areas, it is almost impossible to remove carcasses, and some areas of his ranch he visits perhaps twice a year. Robinson suggested gasoline or lime could be carried in by horseback, and the carcass burned or covered with lime to prevent depredation. Explosives to blow up the carcass are another option.

“ We have Freedom of Information Act documents which show that the Forest Service offered to remove carcasses where the wolves had been eating only elk and didn't depredate on cattle until after there were carcasses, and the rancher refused,' Robinson said.

“ What you're saying seems like a fairy tale,' Bundy said. “ The likelihood of finding a carcass and being able to manage the ranch is unlikely.'

Wehrheim was asked about the Catron County ordinance that allows taking wolves. It is being tested in court.

“ We created an ordinance that if a wolf is frequenting a household more than three times, and we asked the IFT to trap or remove the wolf and they didn't do it, we could live trap the wolf,' Wehrheim said.

“ We tested it once and were threatened with arrest. Fladry and hazing don't work. The wolf comes right back.'

Griego invited Wehrheim and Robinson to attend the next meeting of the committee in Espa-ola and said Game and Fish would also be there.

Sen. Mary Jane Garcia asked why the wolf couldn't be put in a large center to be promoted.

Wehrheim said the money spent on the wolf program would allow a center of maybe 70,000 acres, surrounded by fence.

"The intent of the Endangered Species Act is to preserve the ecosystem," Robinson said. "You don't get that if it's just a large zoo."

Garcia asked him if he had any livestock. Robinson said he has dogs and cats and a 3-year-old daughter whom he would not leave unattended because "we have cougars and bears."

Adair asked if he had any sympathy for ranchers.

Robinson said he realizes that adaptability and genetics of a cow is important to be able to live in the region, and "I understand there are real losses, but we need cooperation to find common ground."

Adair said cattle born and bred in the area "are not replaceable. Without any loss you are not in a position of empathy."

Wehrheim pointed out that once a wolf wipes out a ranch, it moves onto another ranch.

Ezzell asked who was surveyed. "I didn't get one."

Robinson said the survey was done by Research and Polling, using randomly chosen phone numbers, which included southwest New Mexico. Six hundred people responded.

The Center of Biological Diversity is funded by its 40,000 dues-paying members. The group does public education, advocacy and has scientists on staff, he said.

Harden asked what gives anyone the right for endangered species to "come on my property."

Robinson said wildlife is in the trust of the state, unless it is endangered and then the federal government has the authority to manage it.