

Eastern Arizona Courier

Mexican Wolf To Remain On List

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By Walter Mare, Copper Era managing editor

There was good news and bad news as far as the Greenlee County Board of Supervisors was concerned.

Chairman Hector Ruedas announced at the Dec. 20 board meeting that the five-year review of the Mexican gray wolf introduction program is almost completed. He said that was fine with him, although the program has been in existence for seven years and it has taken that long to perform a five-year review.

Ruedas, who sits on a wolf program oversight committee, said, "Thank God it's over. There were thousands of hours spent on this review."

The bad news? That was delivered by County Administrator Kay Gale, who said the wolves are not being removed from the Endangered Species list as was hoped. Instead, the Mexican wolf, which now inhabits part of Greenlee, will be considered endangered in 47 of the 48 contiguous states until all gray wolves are no longer considered endangered in those 47 states.

Only Minnesota has succeeded in having gray wolves reclassified from endangered to threatened.

Gale said most of the hurt lies with the recent U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service decision not to appeal a January 2005 U.S. District Court ruling striking down the USFWS's reclassification of gray wolf populations from endangered to threatened for much of the species' current range in the United States.

County officials have opposed the wolf introduction since its inception. They cite loss of cattle by ranchers in northern Greenlee County and added danger to human activity in the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest.

Wolves were released in the Blue Wilderness area but now also inhabit the Blue River area where cattle ranches and homes are located. Wolves also roam around Eagle Creek, which also has ranches and homes. Some ranchers have told of close encounters with wolves and how they feared for their safety and that of their horses and dogs.

They speak heatedly of the restrictions on shooting wolves, although they may be posing a danger to persons or livestock.

Another rub among ranchers is a compensation program that is supposed to pay for cattle killed by wolves. Cattle growers say the problem with that is finding the cattle that have been killed in the first place, and then proving the kill was made by a wolf. Some ranchers say they have lost livestock to wolves and have never seen a penny in compensation.

There is also a fear among some that recreational activities in the forest may no longer be safe. A few years ago, a woman reported her dog was attacked and killed by a wolf at a rest stop or campground in northern Greenlee.

Some wolves have been shot to death. Rewards have been offered by the USFWS, but to date there have not been any takers, and the shooters remain unknown.

The other side

While county officials are shaking their heads in disappointment, others are not. Proponents of the wolf reintroduction program, such as the Center for Biological Diversity, lauded the USFWS decision not to appeal the court ruling.

In a news release from groups supporting the program, Michael Robinson of the Center for Biological Diversity described the court ruling and the USFWS's decision not to appeal the ruling as a triumph of science over politics.

"Interior Secretary Gale Norton tried to gerrymander the entire contiguous 48 states so that wolves in a few areas would make up for the absence of wolves in much larger regions," Robinson said.

He said the court's ruling and the Fish & Wildlife Service's decision also bode well for recovery of gray wolves in the southern Rocky Mountains of Colorado, the Grand Canyon eco-region and adjoining Utah's canyon country, and the Pacific Northwest.

According to Robinson, the Jan. 31, 2005, ruling by U.S. District Judge Robert E. Jones enjoined and vacated the April 1, 2003, Fish & Wildlife Service national wolf reclassification rule that had divided all gray wolf historic range in the contiguous 48 states into three huge Distinct Population Segments. He said the USFWS reclassification also down-listed wolves in most of the western and eastern U.S. from "endangered" to "threatened" and precipitated a recovery planning process for wolves in the Southwest, parts of the southern Rocky Mountains and the Colorado Plateau without consideration of the Mexican gray wolf's unique status as a locally evolved subspecies.

Nineteen conservation groups, including the Center for Biological Diversity and Defenders of Wildlife, filed the lawsuit (Civil case No. 03-1348-JO) that resulted in the January court ruling. Robinson said.

He said the decision means that Mexican gray wolves cannot be delisted without establishment of wolf populations in broader areas in the Southwest. He said the Fish & Wildlife Service has banned the Mexican wolf from the Sky Islands ecosystem in which it evolved and had sought to release Mexican wolves into regions far from their historic range, where political opposition would be lower.

The Sky Islands consist of isolated mountains in southeastern Arizona and southwestern New Mexico rising out of a desert "ocean." They include such well-known mountain ranges as the Chiricahuas, Peloncillos and Pinalenos (Mount Graham).

Robinson said, "It appears the Interior Department has finally read the plain meaning of the Endangered Species Act correctly. Now, instead of drawing lines on the map based on political considerations, any future lines must be based on science."

That was a statement most elected officials and ranchers in Greenlee are very unlikely to agree with.

