

2 Versions – Longer one first.

<http://kvoa.com/Global/story.asp?S=6700733>

Endangered wolf program remains a complex, volatile issue

RESERVE, N.M. -- On a file cabinet outside Catron County Manager Bill Aymar's office sits a stuffed animal: a sheep in wolf's clothing, armed with a machine gun.

Aymar calls it his "answer to the wolf problem."

The problem, in the view of southwestern New Mexico ranchers, is a program that began in 1998 to reintroduce endangered Mexican gray wolves into their historic range in Arizona and New Mexico, where they'd been exterminated at the behest of the livestock industry decades ago.

Environmentalists contend the problem isn't the wolves _ but the ranchers who refuse to accept the reintroduction program.

Almost from the program's start, wolves killed cattle. Rancher and Catron County Commissioner Hugh B. McKeen says it's been too much for a way of life already stressed by other predators and increasing rules on federal lands.

"It's a disaster," says McKeen, who runs 108 head on 11 square miles of largely public land near the village of Alma. He's lost one cow to wolves, but says neighbors have lost many more. "It's not just the cattle they eat. But it's the cattle they scatter and run through fences."

Conservationist Michael Robinson, who lives in the Grant County village of Pinos Altos about an hour from McKeen's ranch, says wolves are integral to the ecosystem.

He contends ranchers are partly to blame for livestock losses because they haven't kept a better eye on herds and refuse to remove carcasses of cows that die for whatever reason, giving wolves a chance to develop a taste for beef.

"Wolves are not going to change their behavior," Robinson says. "We as humans have the ability to do so."

He complains that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which oversees wolf reintroduction, refuses to acknowledge that livestock carcasses are a problem.

The only view both sides share is a suspicion of Fish and Wildlife.

The agency's Southwest Regional director, Benjamin Tuggle, says that while neither side may like the rules, they're enforced consistently. Those in the program work hard not just to reintroduce wolves, but to try to achieve a balance with ranchers, he says. That "puts me squarely on the fence," Tuggle says.

The Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area encompasses 4.4 million acres of the Gila and Apache Sitgreaves national forests of New Mexico and Arizona plus Arizona's 1.6 million-acre White Mountain Apache reservation, interspersed with private land and towns.

Catron County sprawls across nearly 7,000 square miles, an area nearly as large as Connecticut and Rhode Island but so sparsely populated there's one person for every two square miles. Grant County to the south, at nearly 4,000 square miles, has 31,000 people, most in Silver City and surrounding copper mining towns. Like much of rural New Mexico, folks here backed the Sagebrush Rebellion in the 1980s and early 1990s, when counties throughout the West tried _ unsuccessfully _ to wrest control of public land from the federal government.

Catron County commissioners, displaying that independent streak, in February passed an ordinance claiming the right to remove wolves that are accustomed to humans or have a high probability of harming children or other defenseless people, physically or psychologically.

Fish and Wildlife Service officials respond that the Endangered Species Act supersedes a county ordinance.

Catron County's wolf incident investigator, Jess Carey, says people who live where wolves are roaming are scared for their children. Reserve's school board even voted to put "wolf-proof shelters" at schoolbus stops.

Robinson does not dispute that wolves are potentially dangerous or could kill a person _ although there are no documented cases in North America.

But he also says the argument shifted to children-versus-wolves after courts rebuffed two challenges by the livestock industry to wolf reintroduction.

"They've figured out they're just not getting any traction on their old argument, and to my mind much more honest argument, that their lifestyle is being imperiled," he says.

Tuggle says his agency is trying to address the fears partly by publishing safety cards telling people what to do if they encounter a wolf.

Currently, there are about 60 wild wolves in New Mexico and Arizona, not counting pups born this spring. New Mexico ranchers say that's too many and contend there are many more uncollared and uncounted; environmentalists point out the program expected 102 wolves by now.

Fish and Wildlife's wolf management team intensified its annual December count, and Tuggle says he's confident of the number.

"And if we missed it, we missed it by one or two, not 15 or 20," he says.

Since only the alpha pair of each pack has pups each year, Robinson believes a more telling statistic is the number of breeding pairs. At the end of 2006, Fish and Wildlife reported seven breeding pairs; it originally forecast 18. Tuggle says there are five breeding pairs in the wild now.

Mexican gray wolves are about the size of a German shepherd, weighing 50 to 80 pounds. Those in the program are classified as an experimental, nonessential population that can be moved for straying out of area boundaries or killing livestock.

Robinson _ citing numerous bookmarked reports littering his coffee table _ contends the program's rules exacerbate the species' recovery.

The program repeatedly traps and relocates wolves, largely for straying outside boundaries, putting them under stress by forcing them to constantly relearn the lay of the land, often without their original pack, he argues.

Robinson also says the program is hampered by its Standard Operating Procedure 13 _ essentially a three strikes rule that requires permanent removal of any wolf linked to three livestock kills. If the wolf can't be trapped, it's shot.

Tuggle says he hates permanent removal orders, but the program must follow its own rules.

Last year, the government killed five wolves for cattle kills and permanently removed three others from the wild. In 2005, one wolf was killed and four put into permanent capture.

In addition, since the first release of wolves in March 1998 through March 2007, 49 have died _ 23 illegally shot; 10 hit by vehicles; seven of natural causes; three of other causes, including capture-related ones; and six from unknown causes. That's a minimum estimate since the deaths of pups and uncollared wolves aren't documented, Fish and Wildlife said.

Wildlife Services, a separate agency responsible for confirming livestock killed by wolves, says 59 percent of last year's 88 investigations _ most involving cattle deaths _ were confirmed, probable or possible wolf kills or injuries; 48.3 percent of the 89 head investigated in 2005 were confirmed, probable or possible wolf kills or injuries.

The rest were killed by dogs, coyotes, bears, lions, cars, lightning, poisoning, infections, old age or calving complications.

Not all carcasses are found or are found in time to document what killed them, so figures represent minimums, the agency said.

The wolf kill rate is higher than the program predicted. However, just over half the 2006 depredations were blamed on two packs, which were removed; 54 percent of the 2005 kills were blamed on two other packs, also now defunct, Fish and Wildlife said.

Despite livestock kills, most of the wolves' prey is elk, field surveys show.

McKeen insists there's not enough game, and that federal officials knew that before putting wolves on the ground. "It's never going to work," he says.

Robinson says he was "sort of agnostic" on arguments that wolves and cattle don't mix. But with ranchers' refusal to remove carcasses or have calving take place where they can keep an eye out, "then indeed wolves and cattle are incompatible," he says.

Aymar argues that southwestern New Mexico herds are spread over many square miles and ranchers might not see a particular cow for days or weeks.

Tuggle agrees the area's rugged topography has led to a different type of ranching in which cattle are turned loose on large allotments without cowboys riding herd all the time.

He also believes ranchers would remove carcasses if it weren't so expensive and time-consuming in remote areas.

"I think that's one of the complications with the way we're having to reintroduce the program _ and that's not an indictment on the ranching community," he says.

<http://www.abqjournal.com/news/state/573353nm06-24-07.htm>

Sunday, June 24, 2007

Cattle Vs. the Gray Wolf

By Sue Major Holmes

The Associated Press

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