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## Wildlife Agency Is 'Collaborating' Gray Wolf to Death

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One runs a risk rejecting a call for a "reasonable compromise" issued by a public official inveighing against "polarized groups." But the endangered Mexican gray wolf has been compromised so many times, and consequently is so close to extinction, that we must scrutinize any proposed compromise.

Unfortunately, the proposal advanced by Benjamin Tuggle, southwest regional director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, will not mitigate the threats to the lobo, and is premised on inaccurate statements.

In his commentary "Win-Win Possible in Wolf Recovery" Tuggle wrote: "Will the Blue Range Recovery Area support 100 wolves? Not according to the wolf project's five-year review conducted by independent scientists. Their research considered a variety of factors, including the area's biological carrying capacity, the size of the recovery area and the socioeconomic carrying capacity."

The five-year review was conducted by government personnel who used data in support of their agencies' positions. They were not independent. More substantively, they did not write that the recovery area could not support the modest goal of 100 wolves. The five-year review, released two years late in 2005, did not even address that question.

The recovery area's carrying capacity was analyzed in the 2001 three-year review, also known as the Paquet Report for its lead author, Paul C. Paquet of the University of Calgary. Paquet is one of the world's leading wolf biologists, and his three colleagues in the review brought additional expertise in wolf recovery, population demographics and statistical analysis.

Unlike the authors of the five-year review, none of the authors of the three-year review are affiliated with government agencies, and three of them are in academia. The Paquet Report concluded, looking at elk and deer availability and not counting bighorn sheep, pronghorn, javelina and beaver, all of which wolves eat, that the recovery area could support between 213 and 468 wolves.

But this past January, a year after the area was projected to reach the reintroduction project's goal of 100 wolves with an estimated 18 breeding pairs, a count revealed only 52 wolves and three breeding pairs.

Tuggle's notion of a "socioeconomic carrying capacity," though not addressed in the five-year review, betrays his agency's bias — and points to another reason his "compromise" proposal must be viewed skeptically. He frames the issue of wolf reintroduction around his own agency's fitness for the job:

"To understand the current controversy surrounding Mexican wolf reintroduction in the Southwest, it is important to appreciate Fish & Wildlife's mission: Working with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The concepts of wildlife and habitat conservation and working collaboratively are key to the service's mission."

The Fish and Wildlife Service did develop as a collaborative agency: Beginning in 1917, the agency developed cooperative agreements with private livestock associations and local, state and other federal agencies, in which those entities gave the agency money to exterminate wolves and other wildlife.

With these funds and direct appropriations from Congress, the Fish and Wildlife Service killed the last western U.S.-born wolf in 1945, then in 1950 developed similar cooperative agreements with Mexican authorities.

After passage of the U.S. Endangered Species Act in 1973 and live-capture of the last known five lobos in Mexico between 1977 and 1980, the Fish and Wildlife Service refused to help fund captive facilities to breed the animals and blocked reintroduction until compelled to do so by a conservationist lawsuit.

Having shot 11 Mexican wolves since reintroduction in 1998, trapped dozens more, and killed 18 accidentally as a result of capture, not to mention terminated development of an up-to-date Mexican wolf recovery plan, it is fair to say that the service's decision-making culture is still oriented toward predator

control on behalf of the livestock industry.

The agency knows that suppressing the wolf population is leading to irreversible genetic deterioration. The government has shot a genetically irreplaceable wolf, months after he ceased depredating cattle and was observed feeding on an elk, and has not acted on scientists' urgent requests to adopt a protocol to save other genetically valuable animals.

Tuggle's solution is a multi-million dollar publicly-financed fund managed by and on behalf of the livestock industry, with no rules ensuring that even a single wolf otherwise to be targeted for removal might be spared.

That may constitute traditional Fish and Wildlife Service collaboration, but it will not recover the progeny of the last few survivors of its earlier cooperative agreements.

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