

Groups seek federal probe

By Levi Hill/Sun-News Bureau Chief

Article Launched:08/25/2007 01:00:00 AM MDT

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SILVER CITY — This week, eight conservation groups, headed by Forest Guardians, requested a federal investigation into allegations that a USDA Wildlife Services predator control officer pointed a rifle at a New Mexico Game and Fish biologist last month in Catron County.

The alleged incident occurred on July 5 in Catron County when NM Game and Fish biologist Angela Dassow, 26, was sent to deliver a suspension order for the lethal taking of Alpha Female 924, a Mexican gray wolf.

Dassow alleged, in an interview with the Albuquerque Journal, that the USDA agent pointed a rifle at her and told her she had "no business" at the scene.

Catron County officials said last month that Dassow showed up on scene emotional, screamed at USDA officials for killing "her wolf" and then violated policy by removing the wolf's corpse before USDA agents could finish their required duties.

Catron County Manager Bill Aymar said Dassow's vehicle was found wrecked later that same day, several miles from her home. He said county deputies found Dassow lying on the floor of her home, having broken a window to gain entry.

Dassow resigned her position with NM Game and Fish shortly after the alleged incident.

Forest Guardians spokeswoman Melissa Hailey said a federal investigation is requested because allegations were made against federal employees.

"The allegations were very serious," she said. "We think someone other than Catron County should be looking at it."

Hailey cited the county's "anti-wolf" position as one reason for having the investigation conducted by "law enforcement officers without any real or apparent conflict of interest."

"We have no knowledge that USDA is not already doing this," Hailey said of a possible federal investigation that may already be under way. "They don't make public the investigations they are working on. This is just a way for us to cover all our bases."

The investigation conducted by Catron County Sheriff's officials has been turned over to the state's Seventh Judicial District for review.

Seventh Judicial District Attorney Clint Wellborn said in an e-mail interview that he received the last reports from the investigation this week and hopes to make a decision by next week.

He said federal agencies could conduct an investigation if they desire, but said Catron County is not the only agency that played a role in the current investigation.

"These groups have incomplete information," Wellborn said. "I have reports not only from the Catron SO, but also NM Game and Fish, NM State Police and US Fish and Wildlife and I have statements from everyone involved with the incident."

Catron County officials did not comment on the investigation request by Forest Guardians.

Other conservation groups involved in the request include; the Center for Biological Diversity, Sierra Club, Grand Canyon Wolf Recovery Project, Southwest Environmental Center, Animal Protection of New Mexico, Animal Protection Voters and Sinapu.

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