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Organizations are requesting wolf meetings be held as public forums

Conservation and animal-protection groups are calling on a federal agency to conduct upcoming wolf meetings as public hearings.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service officials will hear comments about the Mexican gray wolf reintroduction program at eight sessions, including meetings next week in Santa Clara and Reserve.

The environmental organizations want the meetings conducted as hearings, with oral comments "recorded and considered," according to Michael Robinson of the Pinos Altos office of the Center for Biological Diversity.

"Presently, oral comments at the meetings are not due to be recorded," Robinson wrote in a news release.

Victoria Fox of the USFWS said organizations and individuals may file written comments about the program.

"The purpose of these meetings is the five-year review (of the recovery effort), the standard operating procedures, and the proposed one-year moratorium on releases (of wolves into the wild)," she told the Daily Press.

The environmental groups also requested that three regional officials of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, who attended two recent meetings with ranchers, be

present at the upcoming meetings.

Robinson said the agency proposed the moratorium and new program rules "as a result of private meetings — at the behest of (U.S.) Rep. Steve Pearce — between senior regional officials of the agency and ranchers who oppose recovery of the wolf."

According to Fox, the officials took part in those discussions because Pearce invited them. She rejected the notion that the moratorium proposal came out of talks.

"The moratorium had been under consideration prior to those meetings," Fox said.

Robinson's request that the officials attend the upcoming sessions is "being considered," Fox said. She also reported that the Adaptive Management Oversight Committee, which runs the recovery program, is mulling whether to run the meetings as hearings.

The population of reintroduced Mexican gray wolves in southwest New Mexico and southeast Arizona declined last year "largely because of federal control actions," Robinson wrote.

Fox responded: "I really can't address that."

The agency's most recent count of collared wolves was 26, plus an undetermined number of uncollared animals, in the wild. Fox noted that females in six packs are denning, with an unknown number of pups.

Robinson wrote: "The June 2001 three-year review of the program, conducted by independent biologists, included recommendations on how to ensure growth of the population. But those measures have not been adopted by the Fish and Wildlife Service.

"The scientists have been saying more wolves should be released, and fewer removed; but the government proposes to kill and trap more wolves, and release fewer of them," Robinson wrote.

"This is a recipe for the second extermination of the lobo."

The meetings in southwest New Mexico, both scheduled for 6-9 p.m., are set for Wednesday, June 15, at the Reserve Community Center; and Thursday, June 16, at the National Guard Armory in Santa Clara.

For more information about the meetings, as well as the proposed policy changes, see the Web site <http://mexicanwolf.fws.gov>.