

SILVER CITY SUN-NEWS

Panel proposes major rule changes

By Thomas J. Baird SUN-NEWS BUREAU CHIEF
Dec 20, 2005, 06:00 am

The committee which oversees management of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Mexican gray wolf reintroduction program has recommended dozens of changes to the rule governing the endangered lobo in New Mexico and Arizona .

The two most notable changes proposed by the program's Adaptive Management Oversight Committee would allow the wolf to roam beyond a preset recovery area without facing control actions such as trapping and relocation; while the other measure would allow private property owners and ranchers to fire non-lethal weapons at wolves if the lobos are caught attacking or depredating domestic animals or livestock.

John Oakleaf, wolf recovery program coordinator for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, said Monday that the proposed changes -- which are part of the program's Five-Year Review -- should be finalized and released by year's end.

"In terms of the boundary change, it would allow wolves from Interstate 10 to Interstate 40," he said. "If they disburse into those areas, they'd be allowed to remain, rather than what's under the current rule."

As for the proposed change for using non-lethal force to scare

off wolves, Oakleaf said he believed that wolves need to be educated, too.

"It allows the use of less-than-lethal force -- which is not just ranchers, but private individuals, too," he said. "For using things like rubber bullets, it broadens the number of people who can do it. We think it's a good idea to educate wolves through less-than-lethal and proactive measures and reduce the reactive measures like trapping for removal or lethal control.

Michael Robinson, carnivore conservation coordinator for the Center for Biological Diversity in Pinos Altos, said Monday that the change in allowing wolves to leave artificial boundaries was recommended by independent scientists several years ago and that implementation of the change is long overdue.

"We're delighted by the recommendation, which was made in June 2001 in the Paquette Report," he said. "But they state that they're going to draft suggested language for the Federal Register by April 30, 2007, while the field team has already approved such language. It just seems like an unnecessary delay."

But in addition to timing issues, Robinson is also concerned

about another proposed change which could limit the number of lobos allowed to roam wild.

"One of the problems is it allows states to issue regulations that would essentially cap the wolf population at 125 animals," he said. "The first time Arizona or New Mexico have anti-conservation governors once again, then they can define these unacceptable impacts, which allows them to handle populations down to 125 animals."

However, John Morgart, Wolf Recovery Program coordinator for the Blue Range, said Monday that the process of making changes to the rule governing wolves is far from over.

"These are recommendations that then go to the Fish and Wildlife Service director for his decision to either go forth, accept them or tweak them," he said. "But the bottom line is, we need to increase boundaries and liberalize the ability of folks on the ground to give them a little better opportunity to provide control measures, better than they can under the current rule - to give them a little bit more of a tool to help us manage these nuisance issues."

Michael J. Robinson
Center for Biological Diversity

P.O. Box 53166
Pinos Altos, NM 88053

www.biologicaldiversity.org