

Panel to decide on wolf hearings

by Thomas J. Baird
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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said Thursday that it has elevated a request by conservation groups to turn upcoming public meetings into public hearings.

The move puts the decision into the hands of the Adaptive Management Oversight Committee of the Mexican wolf recovery program. Committee Chairman Terry Johnson, who received the request from conservationists, along with Fish and Wildlife Service Regional Director Dale Hall, was out of the office this week and unavailable for comment.

"It's pretty clear we want to focus on public interaction on the five-year review, the proposed one-year moratorium on new releases of captive wolves, the standard operating procedures that guide the project and the reintroduction project," said Victoria Fox, a spokeswoman for the Fish and Wildlife Service. "They will consider public comment, but as it stands now, formal public comments must be submitted in writing. That was the purpose of the scheduled meetings in Arizona and New Mexico."

Conservation groups called upon the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Arizona Game and Fish Department on Wednesday to hold public hearings with recorded testimony, rather than public meetings where comments from the residents would not be considered testimony.

Ten conservation and animal protection groups in New Mexico and Arizona made the request for the eight upcoming meet-

ings on Wednesday.

Michael Robinson, carnivore conservation coordinator for the Center for Biological Diversity in Pinos Altos — one of the organizations making the requested change — said it would only be fair to change the meetings to hearings and to include Fish and Wildlife Service officials who attended private meetings with ranchers earlier in the year.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Arizona Game and Fish Department, New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, U.S. Forest Service, USDA-APHIS Wildlife Services and White Mountain Apache Tribe have been involved in reintroducing the Mexican wolf to areas of Arizona and New Mexico since 1988.

Fox said the cooperating agencies use an adaptive approach in the management of the project, operating as a core team called the Mexican Wolf Blue Range Reintroduction Project Adaptive Management Oversight Committee. The group has drafted five new standard operating procedures for public review and comment that will guide wolf management activities and related decisions regarding the reintroduction project.

The new procedures address supplemental feeding, road kill salvage, wolf control, helicopter capture, and aerial monitoring flights. The procedures are accompanied by a proposed one-year moratorium on new releases of captive-bred Mexican wolves that have never been in the wild.

John Morgart, Fish and Wildlife coordinator for the wolf program and a member of

the oversight committee, told the Sun-News Thursday that he expects Johnson to ask the entire committee for input before a decision is made on the requests by conservation groups.

"It's a short turnaround time to accommodate," he said. "These are very specific meetings that we are looking at as an opportunity to respond to questions and listen in general."

Morgart said even if the meetings are not changed to hearings, those attending could still submit comments in writing to the organization and the input would be given the same consideration as if it had been testimony at a public hearing.

Morgart also said that time is running out for an alpha male and female wolf of the Francisco Pack near Reserve. The female is in a den with four surviving pups and the male is in the area, but not fitted with a radio tracking collar. The adults depredated cattle in the region and the Fish and Wildlife Service issued a lethal take order on the animals.

Morgart said if the male is not trapped or shot by the time the pups reach six weeks of age — which is about two weeks hence — the pups would be difficult to catch. Officials are providing the adult female with road kill and other food supplements while other agents are focusing on trapping or shooting the male.