

River otter reintroduction delayed

Sun News Report

SILVER CITY - The much-anticipated reintroduction of the river otter into its native range on the Gila River will be delayed for at least a year.

According to Dutch Salmon, a member of the New Mexico State Game Commission, the river otter reintroduction, which was authorized in the summer of 2006, was scheduled to take place this fall on a 42-mile stretch of the Gila between Grapevine Campground - near Gila Hot Springs - and Mogollon Creek. Simultaneously, a reintroduction in the Rio Grande Gorge outside Taos was authorized.

"I just learned (Thursday) that there aren't enough otters to do both reintroductions this year," Salmon said. "So, the Department of Game & Fish has decided to go ahead with the Rio Grande reintroduction this fall and to postpone the reintroduction on the Gila until the fall of 2008. We're getting the otters from Oregon, and I guess they just didn't have enough for both reintroductions this year."

The last confirmed sighting of a river otter on the Gila River was in 1953, Salmon said.

"It was trapped near Cliff," he said.

The otter reintroduction is fairly unique, in that the species is not listed as endangered or threatened by the U.S. government. It is listed as endangered by the state of New Mexico.

As well, there was no litigation or threat of litigation on the part of environmental groups.

"People are mistakenly under the impression that all groups like ours do is litigate," said Michael Robinson, a conservation advocate with the Center for Biological Diversity, which was involved in the otter reintroduction dialogue for several years. "Actually, 90-percent of what we do is public education, biological research and administrative advocacy. That sort of work doesn't get the attention that litigation does. The river otter was a perfect example of an issue that did not require litigation. Through the efforts of people like Dutch Salmon and the New Mexico Game Commission, this moved forward without any legal action."

"This is totally being done by the state of New Mexico at the direction of the State Game Commission, which is the policy-making body of the Game & Fish Department," Salmon said. "I was the one who introduced the motion to reintroduce the otter onto the Rio Grande. Then I added the Gila. The San Francisco River was also part of the otter's native range, but, in the interest of harmony and not stirring up a hornet's nest, I did not include the San Francisco River in my motion."

As Salmon's last statement would indicate, there was indeed opposition to the river otter reintroduction in Catron Country.

"The people of Glenwood opposed it in the San Francisco River, because they felt that a lot of people come visit their town to fish for catfish," Salmon said. "They were concerned that otters would decimate the catfish population in the San Francisco. First of all, I don't think it would, but, secondly, I think having river otters in the San Francisco would be a tourist draw. When I canoed the Verde River in Arizona, all the river runners were asking each other if they saw any otters. Otters were the main draw for a lot of people on that river."

Salmon added that concern was also expressed about the potential negative fisheries impact otters might have on the Gila.

"A lot of people were worried that they would go up into the headwaters of the Gila and eat the endangered Gila trout," he said. "Otters need water where there is a good quantity and variety of fish, so they will stay where there are deeper pools, which are found on the main branch of the Gila. They will end up having a beneficial impact on the ecosystem because they will eat a lot of non-native fish, like carp, bass and catfish. Also, they will eat a lot of crayfish, which are also non-native."

"The opposition came from the same nay-sayers who oppose every attempt to improve the ecosystems of New Mexico," Robinson said.

Salmon said the initial reintroduction of otters onto the Gila will likely include about 12 animals.

"I recall biologists saying that they thought a reasonable number of otters on that section of the Gila would be between 50 and 75," Salmon said. "I don't know how long the reintroduction will take, but I think we will see otters on the Gila in the fall of 2008."

According to Taos-based Friends of the Wild River, it will cost about \$1,000 per animal to reintroduce the river otter into New Mexico.

The Web site luddist.com states that river otters are three to four feet long and weigh 15-25 pounds. They live up to 15 years in the wild. Their coats range from nearly black to reddish or grayish brown on their backs. The belly is silvery of grayish brown.

The velvety fur of a river otter is the most durable North American fur and is still in high demand in Europe.

More than 50,000 otters were killed in the U.S. last year for their fur, 10,000 in Louisiana alone, luddist.com reports.