

SILVER CITY SUN-NEWS

Wolf meeting treads old ground

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The posturing came early Friday and the debate was as semantical as it was scientific.

Dozens of area residents, along with a few people from Las Cruces, El Paso and Reserve, attended a Mexican Wolf Adaptive Management Working Group meeting at Western New Mexico University to learn more about the future plans for wolf reintroduction and recovery in New Mexico and Arizona.

The majority of attendees were conservation group members or individuals who support wolf reintroduction, but several representatives from the livestock industry were also present. The questions from all sides were predictable -- How many wolves are there? How many more wolves will be released? Why are wolves allowed to kill cattle and jeopardize livelihoods? Is this program where we want it to be?

The meeting was organized by the Mexican Wolf Blue Range Reintroduction Project's Adaptive Management Oversight Committee, which on Friday included members of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Arizona Game & Fish Department, U. S. Forest Service, New Mexico Game & Fish Department and the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

"There is certainly every opportunity to disagree with each other, without being disagreeable with each other," said AMOC Chairman Terry Johnson, while laying down the ground rules for the meeting. "There's plenty of room for informed dissent, as well as informed content."

The meeting began with a rundown of the Mexican gray wolf Interagency Field Team's best year-end estimates of the number of breeding pairs of wolves in the wild and the total number of Mexican

wolves believed to be in Arizona and New Mexico.

Team members estimated there are a minimum of 35 wolves between the two states, and as many as 49. Those numbers are down from the previous two years, when the minimum number of wolves believed to be in the wild was 44 in 2004 and 50 in 2003.

Recovery program officials acknowledged that "control" actions taken against some wolves that depredated on livestock, and illegal mortalities of others, were partly responsible for the dwindling numbers. Some wolves who depredated on cattle were trapped or shot and some were taken into captivity.

Early into the meeting, the discussion got a little off track. While the agenda item was the number of wolves believed to be in the wild, Cari Gillespie of the Rural American Alliance in Reserve asked to speak. Johnson granted her the opportunity and she then read a lengthy prepared statement about ranchers in Catron County who had lost more than 100 head of cattle and thousands of dollars over the past year to a pack of seven to 12 wolves.

When she had finished, Johnson quickly reiterated the ground rules of the meeting and asked everyone in attendance to stick to the topic at hand. He assured everyone that they would have the opportunity to make general comments or statements at the appropriate time.

After more discussion about the changes in methodology for counting breeding pairs of wolves since the end of 2003, which is the ending time frame for the basis of the 5-year review of the program, Michael Robinson of the Center for Biological Diversity raised his concerns about the wolf population numbers.

"I'm very concerned that the Environmental Impact Statement projected 83 wolves by the end of 2005 and 15 breeding pairs," he said. "This is actually called a recovery program, which implies that numbers are actually supposed to go up, not go down."

Robinson asked the committee what it was going to do as far as a policy shift to reverse the decline, other than to make recommendations for changes that could be implemented years from now.

Johnson responded to Robinson's questions and assertions directly by saying that the wolf project is not a recovery project, but a reintroduction project intended to be a component of a broader recovery program that has yet to be articulated.

"This is a reintroduction project with a goal that was set several years ago of at least 100 wolves in the area that was defined under the nonessential, experimental population rule," Johnson said. "We still await delineation of a recovery plan for the Mexican wolf as a whole in the United States and Mexico."

Johnson said the project is seeking to establish a viable wolf population within the region, but he acknowledged the current numbers are not where program officials would like them to be.

"Is this progress towards our reintroduction project goal?" Johnson asked. "No, we've acknowledged that we have had a setback. We have had a decrease of several wolves, depending on whether you're counting from the top or the bottom (of the range). That's reality."

Johnson said no determination has yet been made as to whether more wolves will be released into the wild this year.