

ALBUQUERQUE JOURNAL



JUNE 17, 2005

Speakers at Catron Cty. Meeting Want Wolf Program Killed, Curbed

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RESERVE— Ranchers in Catron County are boiling mad about the wolves roaming the Gila country and want the government reintroduction effort scrapped or dramatically altered.

If the program does continue, they say, any of the endangered Mexican gray wolves in New Mexico that stray outside the Gila Wilderness should be fair game for shooting.

"The only thing that will save this county from complete ruin is either do away with the wolf program completely or restrict the wolves to a small area," Catron County Commission Chairman Ed Wehrheim said Wednesday night.

His comments came during a passionate 2 1/2-hour meeting in Reserve, the heart of ranching country. It was the first in a series being held this week across New Mexico to talk about proposed new rules and a recent review of the wolf reintroduction effort.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and its partners are considering changes to the program, including a recommendation by biologists to allow the wolves to set up territories outside the current boundaries and a one-year ban on some new wolf releases.

"I rebuke your program and I'll celebrate the day you pack up and leave,"

said Catron County business owner Van Allred.

Asked what it would take to get the wolves out of the wild, Terry Johnson, chairman of the program oversight committee, said, "You're going to have to win it in court."

Many of the ranchers said they believe a wolf attack on a child is inevitable.

Don Gatlin, manager of the Rainy Mesa Ranch where wolves have killed cattle recently, said his 5-year-old and 8-year-old children are too scared to play outside.

"When that wolf gets one of my kids ... God be with each and every one of you," Gatlin told the panel of government officials running the meeting, winning applause from the audience of about 80.

The ranchers said the government is dramatically undercounting the number of cows and calves killed by wolves, in part because many cannot be confirmed as wolf kills.

Don Jones of the Y Canyon Ranch read a 35-day log written by his wife, Jeannie, including this entry: "June 3. Found another dead cow. A two-year-old cow dead too long for a call! ... We just cannot find them as quick as the wolves kill them!"

Ranchers also criticized a socioeconomic impact analysis of the wolf program and said they don't trust the gov-

ernment agencies running the program.

Craig Miller of Defenders of Wildlife—which compensates ranchers for livestock killed by wolves—was the only speaker to support the wolf program.

"In addition to the compensation fund, we will put money on the table to put your ideas in the field," he said. "A heck of a lot more can and needs to be done to prevent losses from occurring like hiring riders during calving season, condensing calving season where it's appropriate ... doggone it, we've got to try."

"If we put a fraction of the amount of effort we put into these public meetings, public hearings, blasting each other in the media, organizing, making fun of each other, we would have this thing licked," he said.

As Miller was advocating more cooperation between his organization and ranchers, he was interrupted by the audience with questions like, "What's your compensation for a child?"

Wednesday's meeting was dominated by ranchers, while a meeting Saturday in Albuquerque is expected to draw more wolf supporters.