

Wolf advocates seek public hearings

by Thomas J. Baird

Conservation groups Wednesday called upon the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Arizona Game and Fish Department to hold public hearings with recorded testimony throughout the region on the wolf reintroduction program.

Ten conservation and animal protection groups in New Mexico and Arizona requested that eight upcoming meetings intended to allow public comment on proposed changes to Mexican gray wolf policies be turned into public hearings at which comments are recorded and considered.

The request was made in the form of a letter to Terry B. Johnson, endangered species coordinator of the Arizona Game and Fish Department; and H. Dale Hall, regional director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Victoria Fox, a spokeswoman for the Fish and Wildlife Service, said that a decision on the request has not yet been made. "But it does not seem to be an unreasonable request and it is being taken into consideration," she said.

The groups also requested that three top-level regional officials of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service who attended two private meetings in February with ranchers also attend the eight scheduled public meetings.

According to the federal agency and conservation groups, the scheduled meetings are to consider whether to impose a one-year moratorium on releases of Mexican wolves from the captive breeding population, a moratorium on most re-releases of

wolves captured from the wild, and a set of new rules for management of the wild population that includes requirements to trap and kill more wolves than in the past.

"The scientists have been saying more wolves should be released and fewer removed, but the government proposes to kill and trap more wolves and release fewer of them," said Michael Robinson, carnivore conservation coordinator for the Center for Biological Diversity in Pinos Altos, one of the signatory groups. "This is a recipe for the second extermination of the lobo."

Robinson added that it would only be fair that the decision-makers who attended the private meeting with ranchers also listen to the public.

The letter by the conservation groups called the agency plan to not record public input "inadequately responsive to the tremendous public concern the proposed policy shifts have engendered."

According to Robinson, the Fish and Wildlife Service reported the population of the reintroduced Mexican gray wolf declined by 20 percent during 2004, from 55 to 44 animals, largely because of federal control actions.

The June 2001 "Three-Year Review" of the Mexican wolf reintroduction program, conducted by independent biologists, included recommendations on how to ensure growth of the population. But those measures have not been adopted by the Fish and Wildlife Service, Robinson added.

Robinson said the Mexican gray wolf is

considered the most imperiled mammal in North America.

As of Wednesday, control officers with the Fish and Wildlife Service were still attempting to trap an alpha male wolf that has attacked cattle on grazing allotments and ranches near Reserve. The wolf's mate, F511, has denned in the area and is caring for a litter of pups. The pair, known as the Francisco Pack, are under a "lethal take" order by the federal agency, which has said it would prefer to take all the animals alive and put them back in the captive breeding program.

Under the rules of the program, the adult animals could not be released again into the wild due to the number of cattle depredations they have made.

Robinson has repeatedly asserted that the animals were drawn to the area by neglected cattle carcasses, a claim local ranchers deny.

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