

Wolf Kills Might Be Allowed

Wednesday, December 14, 2005

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The committee overseeing the Mexican gray wolf reintroduction program in New Mexico and Arizona has proposed far-reaching changes that would give wolves more room to roam and ranchers more options for dealing with wolves that prey on livestock.

One recommendation would allow ranchers to kill problem wolves when the population is big enough.

Arizona's game commission heard the recommendations on the endangered wolf program last week, and New Mexico's commission will hear a presentation at its meeting Friday in Carlsbad.

Terry Johnson, chairman of the oversight committee, emphasized many of the proposed changes are recommendations to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and changes would require a lengthy public process.

But he also said the recommendations— part of an overdue, five-year review of the wolf program— are "a step forward" in giving the public a clear idea of what is planned for the future of the program.

People on both sides of the debate criticized some proposed changes in interviews Tuesday.

The New Mexico Farm and Livestock Bureau supports nothing short of ending the wolf reintroduction program.

The Center for Biological Diversity said the recommendations would effectively keep wolves from ever getting off the endangered species list.

Recommendations include:

- Allowing wolves to live anywhere in the "experimental population area"— a band all the way across both states and stretching from Interstate 40 to Interstate 10 and the New Mexico-Texas border.

- Considering expanding those boundaries to allow wolves to roam far enough that they might eventually meet and breed with other wolf populations.

- Allowing the release of wolves directly from captivity into New Mexico, something not allowed today.

Michael Robinson of the Center for Biological Diversity in Pinos Altos praised those recommendations, saying they are things scientists have suggested for years.

- Relocating wolves that have caused problems— getting into conflicts with humans or killing livestock— either inside or outside of the recovery area, depending on where they are caught.

- Allowing states and tribes to give individuals permits to harass wolves with things like rubber bullets.

"It's far better to shoot these kinds of things at a wolf than come back later and remove a wolf because of a depredation problem," Johnson said.

People now are allowed to yell at or shoot over a wolf to scare it away, but not to actually hit it.

States and tribes would be able to issue permits to kill wolves in the act of attacking domestic dogs on private or tribal land.

- Once the wolf population climbs above 125, states and tribes would be allowed to issue permits to kill wolves to resolve depredations, nuisance problems and "unacceptable impacts" on elk and deer.

There are about 28 wolves in the wild now. "This is one of the huge changes," Johnson said. It also might be the most controversial.

Robinson said it creates an effective cap on the wolf population. "What that means is we'd have a permanently endangered species," he said. "We'd fight that like hell."

- Creating a government-funded program to address economic impacts of wolf nuisance and livestock depredation problems, including a possible reduction in federal grazing fees for ranchers who fence corrals or change their herding practices.

Farm and Livestock Bureau spokesman Erik Ness called the recommendations Band-Aids on a program that is hemorrhaging. "These recommendations are emblematic of a broken program," he said. "We would urge the game commission to back up and take a whole new look at the program ... and think about shutting it down."

The recommendations also should be posted on the program Web sites, <http://mexicanwolf.fws.gov> and <http://azgfd.gov/wolf>, as soon as today.