

# SAN BERNARDINO COUNTY SUN

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## Wolf program seeks public input on review, history, status, goals

By Thomas J. Baird

With a final resolution to rancher Kit Laney's case in sight, U.S. Sen. Pete Domenici, R-N.M., and U.S. Rep. Steve Pearce, R-N.M., are urging the U.S. Forest Service to rebuild a working and cooperative relationship with New Mexico livestock producers.

Laney, a Catron County rancher, has butted heads for years with the Forest Service over cattle allotments permitted within portions of the Gila National Wilderness.

Laney's problems with the Forest Service began when he was ordered to remove his cattle from federal grazing land because he did not have a permit. Laney refused, saying he had water and grazing rights to the property before the Forest Service took over operations on the property.

He was arrested March 15 after an alleged altercation with Forest Service rangers and law enforcement officers over the impoundment procedure.

Legal advisers earlier this month indicated that Laney will admit guilt to misdemeanor charges related to the March incident with Forest Service officials.

On Friday Laney was not at the home of Otero County rancher Bob Jones into whose custody Laney was released by a federal court after his release from jail. A woman who answered the phone at Jones' ranch Friday said Jones was not there and she did not know where Laney was or how to contact him.

Domenici and Pearce said the Forest Service should advocate leniency for Laney as the case is resolved in order to rebuild a strong relationship with livestock producers throughout the state who have grazing permits on federal forest lands.

"The end of the Laney case gives the Forest Service a window of opportunity to begin improving its relationship with permittees," Domenici said. "The acrimonious atmosphere generated by the Laney situation is not helpful to the Forest Service or livestock producers. All parties are under a lot of stress. The Forest Service is under pressure to manage the forests better and catch up with its permit renewal process. Ranching has never been easy, and the drought has only made it harder."

On March 31, Pearce requested an investigation by the U.S. Department of Agriculture into the

handling of the matter by the Forest Service. Pearce asked that the Forest Service move forward with establishing strong contacts with livestock producers in the state.

"It should not have come to this point, but now let's put this sad ordeal behind us and move on," Pearce said. "I'm certain there are more important cases for the U.S. Attorney's office to be working on that are affecting our community."

Carl Holguin, New Mexico director of public affairs for the Forest Service, said the agency agreed with the lawmakers. Holguin noted the Forest Service was continuing to employ field personnel to work with ranchers in furthering relationships.

"We agree we need to reach out and communicate better with the ranching community," he said. "We believe the best we can do now is have our people on the ground maintaining and enhancing the grassroots relationships."

In response to the plea of leniency for Laney, Holguin said the Forest Service is staying out of the matter and letting the court system handle the case.

"We think the best thing right now is to let the process work," he said. Area cattle ranchers and

supporters of Laney feel the Forest Service could do a better job of communicating, but most are dubious about the time aspect of the situation.

Jewell Derrick, owner of Uncle Bill's Bar in Reserve where a fundraiser was held for Laney in April, said the Forest Service has not worked to build positive relationships in the past and said she agreed that Laney deserves leniency.

"They have not worked to build positive relationships," Derrick said. "Between them and the environmentalists, they are ruining every rancher in the country. Kit does need leniency. He has been ruined and part of it is his fault, but it isn't all his fault."

Glen McCarty, 79, a third generation cattleman from Reserve, agreed with Derrick.

"They (the Forest Service) have broke him (Laney) and they have abolished the Constitution," McCarty said. "We need help. We need help bad. I wish Sen. Domenici could come out here and see what is going on."

McCarty said he too has suffered from cutbacks by the Forest Service on the number of cattle he can run in the allotments where he has grazing permits. He said one permit in Arizona was cut from 402 to 256 head of cattle and the contract was cut from 5 1/2 months to little more than 100 days, which he said is too short to be worthwhile.

Another of McCarty's permits east of Reserve was cut more than 80 percent, from 310 head year round to just 65 head, he said.

Holguin said he was not familiar

with McCarty's particular case, but noted the state's drought has forced many such cuts, making the agency's task more difficult in New Mexico.

"The drought has affected all aspects of resource management in New Mexico," Holguin said. "We understand and hear their concerns and try to work as closely with them as we can. The drought has been so oppressive in terms of all management aspects out there."

McCarty said he understands the drought situation and only asked that the Forest Service do a better job of monitoring the grass growth in areas where ranchers have grazing permits.

"Someone needs to monitor the grass and adjust what it will run and let us run cattle accordingly," McCarty said. "I don't want to overgraze, but I would like to utilize the pastures I'm on."

Based on language originally authored by Domenici, the U.S. Secretary of the Interior and the Secretary of Agriculture are required until 2008 to renew expiring grazing permits under existing terms and conditions until the processing of a permit or lease is complete.

The pending Senate version of the Fiscal Year 2005 Interior Appropriations Bill provides an additional \$6.6 million to the Forest Service for a total of \$50 million for grazing management activities.