

Wolf project to discuss proposed changes

by Thomas J. Baird
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Public meetings on proposed controversial changes to the Blue Range Mexican Wolf Reintroduction Project will be held today in Santa Clara and Friday in Truth or Consequences.

The public meetings are part of the Adaptive Management Work Group's effort to keep the public informed on issues and actions pertaining to the Blue Range Mexican Wolf Reintroduction Project, according to John Morgart, the program's coordinator.

Morgart said the primary purpose of the meetings is to provide opportunities for the public to learn about and to comment on the Five-year Review of the Blue Range Mexican Wolf Reintroduction Project.

A contentious proposal to implement a one-year moratorium on new releases of captive wolves into the wild will be on the agenda.

Mexican Wolf Adaptive Management Oversight Committee members will consider the oral comment at the meetings, but formal public comment must be submitted in writing, Morgart said. Comments at the meetings will not be recorded.

But last week, nearly a dozen conservation groups throughout the region asked the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to turn the meetings into public hearings — a request officials said came too late.

Michael Robinson, carnivore conservation coordinator for the Center for Biological

Diversity in Pinos Altos, was disappointed by the decision.

"They never bothered to respond," he said. "Nevertheless, it's important for people to express their opinions. We encourage everybody who has an opinion one way or another to participate."

Robinson and other groups have long complained that the program is being run in contradiction to the recommendations made in 2001 by a team of scientists led by Paul C. Paquet, Ph.D., of the University of Calgary. Paquet was the lead author of the official Mexican Wolf Three-Year Review. Paquet said the population would not reach Fish and Wildlife Service goals unless more wolves were allowed to live out their lives in the wild.

"The service has never explained to the public why it solicited advice of scientists and then never acted," Robinson said. "It's only natural that a lot of people are feeling very cynical."

But Robinson has other issues with the Fish and Wildlife Service, the lead agency overseeing the project.

"The agency is already implementing its proposed policies by attempting to shoot or trap the Gila National Forest's Francisco Pack, which includes the last animal to roam free from among the first 11 lobos released in 1998 at the outset of the reintroduction program," he said.

The Francisco Pack's adult wolves, one alpha male and one alpha female who recently whelped pups, are under a "lethal take" order for killing cattle on grazing al-

lotments in the Gila National Forest and nearby ranches outside Reserve in Catron County.

Robinson blamed the depredation by wolves on the lobos being lured to the area by neglected carcasses of cattle that died of other causes — a claim affected ranchers in the area such as Don Gatlin have denied. Gatlin said wolves have cost the Rainy Mesa Ranch, which he manages, tens of thousands of dollars over the past three years.

"We've lost 57 tagged, branded calves and 33 cows since 2003," he said. "We can't keep those cattle in one pasture with wolves chasing them — they go through fences and everything else. The bad thing is, ain't a damn thing you can do about it. You can't do nothing."

The Fish and Wildlife Service has consistently been caught in the middle of the debate, trying to please both conservationists and ranchers, with both sides claiming the agency is not doing its job — and agency officials responding by saying they are doing the best they can.