

ALBUQUERQUE JOURNAL



APRIL 19, 2005

Wolf recovery plan update on hold

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Efforts to update a recovery plan for endangered Mexican gray wolves have been put on hold indefinitely, delaying decisions about whether to relax rules of the Southwest's wolf reintroduction program.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service suspended meetings of the recovery planning team and has no date set to resume the work, said Tracy Scheffler, a recovery biologist and primary liaison for the team.

A federal court ruling earlier this year invalidated a 2003 Fish and Wildlife Service decision to divide wolf ranges into three areas, including a Southwestern population with boundaries stretching into Utah and Colorado.

"We're kind of left here not knowing what our recovery plan goal is," Scheffler said. "It's kind of like getting in a car without knowing where you're going."

For example, a larger geographic area would require more wolves to achieve recovery.

The current recovery plan adopted in 1982 sets an interim goal of 100 wolves in the wild, but scientists agree many more animals are needed to get wolves off the endangered list.

"There has been all through the '90s

a huge need to revise that plan," Scheffler said.

The decision to suspend recovery planning also leaves some important decisions about the federally led wolf reintroduction program up in the air.

Independent scientists and Fish and Wildlife Service biologists for years have urged the government to change the rules to allow wolves to set up territories outside the program boundaries and to allow direct releases of wolves into New Mexico.

Currently, wolves can be released in the Gila only after being let loose in Arizona and then recaptured.

Dale Hall, southwest regional director of the service, has said he wants the recovery team to do its work before a decision is made on rule changes.

The current delay is the latest in a string of unfulfilled promises from the service to act on recommendations for change, said Michael Robinson of the Center for Biological Diversity.

Meanwhile, environmentalists also are criticizing the Fish and Wildlife Service for sending high-level staff to meetings called by Rep. Steve Pearce, R-N.M., to discuss a five-year review of the wolf program.

Joy Nicholopoulos, acting regional director for ecological services; Ren Lohoefer, acting assistant regional director; and Larry Bell, assistant

regional director for external affairs, attended the meetings, according to the service.

Pearce's staff organized the meetings in Glenwood and Socorro for ranchers, hunters and guides who said they couldn't express their concerns and opinions adequately at earlier public open houses held by the wolf recovery team.

Dave Parsons, a biologist and former leader of the wolf program, said the meetings gave wolf opponents access to higher-level decision makers than other members of the public got at the open houses.

Craig Miller of Defenders of Wildlife said the meetings illustrate the "sweetheart relationship" between the livestock industry and the Bush administration.