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Wolf Recovery Takes Cue From Program Foes

Editorial

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is eager to show that it is responsive to the concerns of New Mexico ranchers. When it comes to the 7-year-old saga to reintroduce Mexican gray wolves into parts of southeastern Arizona and southwestern New Mexico, the agency has been tipping toward the ranchers' point of view.

Of course, many ranchers are adamant opponents of plans to reintroduce wolves into lands where they raise livestock. In late January, a federal court dismissed a lawsuit pursued by the ranching industry that aimed to scuttle the program.

A couple of weeks later, Rep. Steve Pearce, R-N.M., convened two invitation-only meetings between high-level wildlife officials and ranchers. The meetings provided special access to top Fish and Wildlife decision makers who hadn't attended four earlier meetings open to the public.

A draft proposal that followed the Pearce-arranged sessions outlined several agency-backed initiatives — one in particular — that mark a departure from the program's goals. Specifically, the agency has proposed a

one-year freeze on the release of captive-bred wolves into the wild. That's a recommendation nowhere to be found in previous scientific reviews of the recovery effort — by independent biologists or the government's biologists.

Wolf program coordinator John Morgart said the moratorium is not "a huge inhibition to our program. ... Yes, it puts some constraints on us that we wouldn't ordinarily have. It also makes an important statement" that the agency will listen to any concerned citizen or group.

Some ranchers claim there are more wolves in the wild than the agency estimates. The proposed moratorium ostensibly will give the federal biologists time to double check their math, before increasing the population through new releases.

The FWS action, like the meetings, shows which way the political winds are blowing. Meanwhile, recommendations to allow wolves to roam more freely or to expand release sites are collecting dust.

If the wolf population in the wild declines, officials will have to revisit those dusty recommendations — if they want the program to succeed.

Pearce, in representing his constituents, has succeeded in temporarily tilting the scales. That may be good politics in his southern New Mexico congressional district, but it marks a setback for wolf recovery on public lands that don't belong to any one interest.