

## Catron Commission Wants To Protect People From Wolves

By Jim Coates  
for Mountain Mail

SOCORRO, New Mexico (STPNS) --

Playing to a packed house, the Catron [County Commission](#) set the stage for a showdown with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service over the Mexican Grey Wolf reintroduction program at its February 7 meeting.

More than 120 people, including a [TV](#) crew from Albuquerque, filled the courtroom as the commission listened to public comments about its proposed "[Wolf](#)-Human Incident Emergency Protective Measures" ordinance.

The ordinance will allow county personnel to immediately remove "habituated wolves that have caused or have a high probability of causing physical and/or [psychological](#) damage to children or other defenseless persons." The ordinance also dictates procedures for killing "habituated wolves, whether or not they have threatened persons."

The county ordinance is contrary to federal regulations that govern the [Recovery Program](#) and the treatment of problem wolves.

"The county ordinance doesn't follow federal law," according to Elizabeth Slown, a public information officer with the regional office of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Albuquerque. "The ordinance does not follow the process we already have to deal with nuisance wolves."

The first 11 Mexican [wolves](#) from captive stock were reintroduced into the Apache National Forest in southeastern Arizona in March 1998. In 2000, the first wolves were released in the Gila National Forest. In January 2007, the Fish and Wildlife Service counted 59 wolves in the forests of New Mexico and Arizona.

Since the inception of the program, the Fish and Wildlife Service has issued removal orders for three wolves that were caught killing [livestock](#). The five-year report issued in December 2005 identified 30 wolf deaths by human causes, including 18 by illegal gunshot and nine by vehicle impact.

Between 1998 and 2003, the agency reported 89 incidents of wolves killing [cattle](#). Twenty two wolves were relocated, according to the 2005 report.

In his opening remarks, commission chairman Ed Wehrheim said the reintroduction program has not properly managed the wolves for the health and safety of Catron County. Using figures from an [economic](#) impact study by Alex Thal, county resource management consultant, Wehrheim said there have been more than "1,000 head of cattle lost, either directly or indirectly, to the wolves." He said the wolves have caused losses to county ranchers of more than \$500,000 since the Mexican Wolf Recovery Program began in Catron County seven years ago.

Jess Carey, county wolf interaction investigator, reports 30 potential livestock losses to wolves, including 13 confirmed deaths, since April 2006. He also said there have been three confirmed deaths of pets and two pet [injuries](#) by wolves, and four wolf-human interactions.

"There have been no attacks on humans yet, but it is inevitable," Wehrheim said. He also called the wolf program "wrong and immoral" and put the blame for it on environmentalists. "[The Center for Biodiversity](#) is responsible. It's a radical group."

When asked what had happened to the original anti-wolf ordinance the county passed early in the program, Wehrheim said, "Federal law supersedes state and county law, but we think this ordinance will hold up."

Describing the process the county has used to document the perceived errors in the wolf recovery program, he said the current ordinance "has a better chance than the previous one."

Commissioner Hugh B. McKeen, a Glenwood area rancher, said, "The ordinance is a step over the line. They'll come after us," he said in reference to the Fish and Wildlife Service.

The commission is hoping to turn the tide of [public opinion](#) against the wolves with the ordinance and its surrounding publicity.

"The county knows what it is up against," Wehrheim said. "We're winning in the county but losing in the nation."

Because of "environmentally-friendly judges," Wehrheim said, "We need to get the word out. We need a picture of a wolf killing a baby elk on a billboard to really get the word out."

Commission [Attorney](#) Ron Shortes agreed. He said, "Except for the media covering this meeting, we are preaching to the choir."

Several times Shortes encouraged those present to attend the New Mexico Game and Fish meeting March 28 in Las Cruces to speak out against the wolf program.

The commissioners were hailed for their action by all those who spoke during the two and a half hour public comment period at the commission meeting February 7. Residents described wolf-human interactions, told horror tales of wolves preying on livestock, pets and game, and espoused constitutional justifications for the commissioners' action.

Jim Blair, a rancher from west of Beaverhead, said, "The program is a failure. Wolves need to be removed. They are waiting to turn out 300 wolves and extend the boundary" of the recovery program.

"I'm upset we're having wolves shoved down our throats by environmental groups," Brian Klumker, an Alma outfitter said. "We need to stand up for ourselves and our livelihood."

Loren Cushman of Reserve spoke as a father, as Reserve school superintendent, and as a [pastor](#). Because his daughter saw the family's cat killed by a wolf on their property, he said, "My kids can't play in the woods now."

Besides his concern about the safety of children at bus stops, Cushman is also worried about the mental effect on children if they are not able to play after school. "I'm not a big believer in [homework](#). Kids need time to play."

Invoking "God's word," Cushman said, "[Animals](#) are here for our pleasure and we are to subdue and have dominion over them. Man is in charge and animals are here for our pleasure."

The new ordinance would give Fish and Wildlife Service [24 hours](#) to remove a wolf under federal program guidelines before Carey is authorized to kill or remove a threatening or habituated wolf, either by trapping or lethal means. The county ordinance calls for the commissioners to approve an order to remove the wolf before Carey can implement that order if the federal program fails to act.

Don Rains, a new Catron County resident, said of the commission, "It takes guts to do something. But it's just a little weak-kneed to give the wolf program 24 hours to do something about problem wolves."

County rancher Don Gatlin said his family has been living in the shadow of wolves for several years.

"Environmentalists say wolves are here so deal with it," he told the commission. "I'm not going to deal with it any more. I don't care what the rules are anymore."

Dan Martinez of Arizona said, "The wolves are violating the 4th amendment of the constitution" which guarantees citizens will be secure in their homes. He also said the wolf recovery program is contrary to the supremacy clause of the U.S. Constitution.

Carolyn Nelson, a rancher from Alma, asked, "Speaking as a mom, what would it be like if someone had threatened my kid and I couldn't do anything about it?"

She said three wolves approached her 14-year-old son this fall while he was hunting in the forest.

Joe Nelson said his son didn't shoot the wolves for fear of prosecution for killing an endangered species.

"The wolves checked him out but he was worried about shooting them," he said. "It would be hard to prove self defense."

No federal representatives attended the meeting when the ordinance was considered. Contacted later, Slown said, "No one should ever worry about shooting a wolf when it is endangering a human life."

Under the program's regulations killing a wolf in self defense or in defense of another human life is permissible.

"If a wolf is killed due to an immediate fear for human life, that's fine," said Slown. "If a wolf is killed for retribution, it is not fine."

When the commissioners approved the ordinance, they received a standing ovation. The ordinance will go into effect after a public hearing.

In other business the commissioners:

- Received recommendations from the County Solid Waste Solutions Committee. Appointed almost two years ago, the committee presented its recommendations for addressing solid waste in the county in a 100 page report.

Mary Rakestraw, committee chairperson, summarized the recommendations for the commissioners. They include forming a Solid Waste Management Authority; accepting that the county needs to ship its solid waste regardless of whether it builds a new land fill in Pie Town; decreasing the number of dumpsters in the county and replacing them with three transfer stations and mobile convenience centers; promoting solid waste management as a service for the health and safety for all residents and charging all residents and property owners equitably; and considering impact fees on land developers to help cover solid waste, as well as other services provided by the county.

[This reporter was an original member of the solid waste committee but has not been active with it for more than six months.]

The next regular meeting of the Catron County Commission will be Wednesday, February 21.

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