

A push for predators

Conservationists advocate for Colorado wolf reintroduction

By WILL SANDS

Ultimately, I think the greater San Juan Mountains are vitally important to wolf recovery. Wolves are also equally important to the San Juans,” said Rob Edward, director of carnivore recovery for the group WildEarth Guardians.

WildEarth Guardians and two other conservation groups recently fired a “first shot over the bow” in an effort to restore wolves to the San Juans and the Southern Rocky Mountains. The groups have filed a formal petition to ensure that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service revise what it says is a woefully outdated Mexican Wolf Recovery Plan. However, the effort is already drawing opposition from an outspoken opponent of predator reintroduction – the Colorado Cattlemen’s Association.

Once indigenous to the local region, wolves were almost completely eradicated from the American West by the 1950s, largely for the benefit of the livestock industry. Most ranchers and farmers remain strongly opposed to the idea of returning the canids to the region.

The opposition has already lost the fight against reintroduction north of Colorado, however. Beginning

in 1995, years of in-fighting and legal battles drew to a close and wolf packs were reintroduced to Yellowstone National Park and the mountains of Idaho as “experimental, nonessential populations.”

Conservationists have hailed the Yellowstone reintroduction as a biological milestone, a move that has restored the natural balance and enhanced the health of the ecosystem. They are now eager to see the experiment repeated in the rest of the Rockies, which would include reintroducing wolves to the Weminuche Wilderness in Durango’s back yard.

Edward explained that the existence of the wolf is critical to the health of the landscapes that they inhabit. The predators are essential to healthy herds of ungulates – elk and deer – and by association, healthy flora on the ground, he added.

“Wolf predation is an ecological process that is as important to the health of the landscape as wildfire,” Edward said.

“They literally change the distribution and behavior of their prey on a daily basis. Without wolves, herds have no reason to move around, and they plow the vegetation to the ground.”



Yukon, a rescued wolf, takes a rare moment to pose for the camera at the Wolf-Wood Refuge and Adoption Center, near Ignacio, in this 2003 file photo. A petition recently filed by three conservation groups is pushing to return these elusive animals to the San Juan Mountains and the Southern Rockies as a whole./Photo by Ben Eng

As a step toward “restoring this balance” in Colorado, WildEarth Guardians, the Rewilding Institute and the Center for Biological Diversity filed their recent petition. The document calls on the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to revise the Mexican Wolf Recovery Plan. The petition argues that amendments in 1988 to the Endangered Species Act effectively nullified the plan, which was created in 1982. It goes on to state that the agency has made only a token effort to restore the lobo to its historic range.

“The bottom line is that we need wolves in the Southern Rockies, and the Southern Rockies need

wolves now,” Edward said. “This petition is our first shot across the bow.”

The 1982 plan called for breeding Mexican wolves in captivity and establishing at least two viable populations through reintroduction, which could reach a populations of 100 animals. However, Mexican wolf numbers are as low as 52 total animals, with just three breeding pairs in clusters around the Gila River region in New Mexico and Arizona. Because of lapses in the recovery plan, nothing short of permanent loss of the Mexican wolf is now at stake, according to Dave Parsons, carnivore conservation biologist for The Rewilding Institute and former Fish and Wildlife Service agent.

“At the end of 2007, 26 years after adoption of a recovery plan and nearly 11 years following initial reintroductions, the total wild population of Mexican wolves is far short of reintroduction goals,” he said. “We could lose the lobo in the wild for a second time if my former agency doesn’t get serious about recovery.”

The petition goes on to allege a great deal of wheel-spinning by the agency. In 1998, the Fish and Wildlife Service announced it would revise the existing recovery plan, but did not. Five years

later, the agency appointed a new recovery team, which was on track to complete revisions by 2005. But at that time, meetings of the team were suspended by H. Dale Hall, the man who is now director of the Fish and Wildlife Service

However, at least one group has no problem with these delays in getting the Mexican wolf back on the landscape. The Colorado Cattlemen’s Association recently issued a statement opposing any further reintroduction and questioning the science cited by WildEarth Guardians.

“We believe that the introduction is driven by the faulty assumption that the presence of the wolf is necessary for healthy ecosystem function,” the association wrote. “We would suggest that any healthy ecosystem has the capability of adapting to the constant change under which it exists.”

The statement went on to express serious reservations about conflicts between wolves and humans as well as concerns about predation by the animals upon livestock. Based principally on these concerns, the CCA has formally opposed any reintroduction of wolves into the Southern Rockies.

“We wonder whether or not the effort needed to address the

potential problems associated with reintroduction is sound public policy, especially in light of the questionable ‘need’ for this particular predator in this ecosystem,” the association wrote.

Edward countered these concerns by pointing to the last 13 years of experience with the Yellowstone reintroduction. Interactions between wolves and humans have been nonexistent, he said, and livestock predation has been limited.

“Our experience on the ground in the Northern Rockies shows that wolves and livestock can share the land,” he said. “While there are cows and sheep killed by wolves every year, the numbers are trivial – less than one-10th of 1 percent – and the ranchers are always compensated.”

Now that the petition has been filed, WildEarth Guardians, the Rewilding Institute, and the Center for Biological Diversity are hoping that the Obama Administration will see wolf reintroduction in this same light.

“The next step is for the next administration to come in,” Edward said. “Once they’re installed, we’ll be paying a visit to them and bringing their attention to the fact that this petition has been filed.”