

# High Country News

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## Bullies get their way in New Mexico's wolf recovery program

*by Laura Paskus*

There's a sign near my house that reads, "Don't just stand there, Stop Bullying!" I remember being teased by the cool girls in middle school during the 1980s. Having survived adolescence, I naively assumed that pint-sized tormenters mature before reaching adulthood. But not always: Adult bullies employing the tactics of gossip, misinformation and fear have triumphed in New Mexico.

On June 9, the New Mexico Game and Fish Commission voted to end the state's participation in the Mexican Gray Wolf Recovery Program. That program is the federal government's attempt to restore wolves to an area straddling Arizona and New Mexico. The effort has been anything but easy, as wolves have been shot, poisoned, transferred from the wild into captivity and "disappeared" throughout their range.

In the 1980s, the federal government set the goal of establishing a minimum population of 100 wolves within their historic range. It was anticipated that the canines would reach that number in 2006. Currently, there are just 50 wolves.

New Mexico's abandonment of Mexican wolves was not a surprise given last year's election of Gov. Susana Martinez, the Republican who replaced Democrat Bill Richardson. Since she took office, she has made appointments to several state commissions that helped consolidate power in the hands of industry and anti-regulation representatives. Her administration has also directed the reorganization of the state's Environment Department, choking off some of its best programs. As for the New Mexico Game and Fish Commission, four of its seven members are her

new appointees; one also serves as a board member of the New Mexico Cattle Growers Association.

When bullies speak, Gov. Martinez listens. Just prior to the Game Commission's vote on wolves, for instance, anti-wolf activists as well as the Catron County Commissioners sent letters to the state wildlife commission and Gov. Martinez accusing wolves of putting their children and ranching livelihoods at risk. The critics went to far as to distribute a disturbing photo of a child in a wood and wire cage – a cage that was designed to keep him safe from wolves while waiting for the school bus.

If the recent vote to withdraw support for wolves was no surprise, it remains a serious blow. Somewhat surprisingly, the state's wildlife department had become an effective advocate for wolf recovery.

In 2008 and 2009, it opposed the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's plans to remove wolves suspected of preying on livestock. Thanks to that stance, the federal agency changed its policy, and those two wolf packs still live in the wild where they have not been preying on livestock.

Now that the state wildlife commission is no longer a partner in the federal wolf recovery program, the department's role has become murky. The state will apparently refuse any federal money to fund employees to work on the program, and the state's representatives will no longer participate in the recovery team. The details are still unclear.

But the wildlife department must continue to enforce state and federal wildlife laws within New Mexico's boundaries, and it must investigate wolf shootings and killings as criminal cases. The department had applied for a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service grant to pay 50 percent of the reimbursement promised for livestock killed by wolves; department spokesman Lance Cherry says the state is now exploring options on

how to administer that grant without using its own staff.

It seems clear that the commission's decision to surrender to the bullies was rash. But while Tom Buckley, a spokesman for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, calls the state's decision "unfortunate," he insists the wolf recovery program will continue -- albeit short-staffed.

However, Michael Robinson, a staffer with the nonprofit Center for Biological Diversity, which has sought the return of Mexican wolves for decades, worries that the government will resume its predator control program and start removing "problem" wolves from the wild. It's "not because the biology has changed," he says, "but because we have different elected officials."

When public officials are so easily influenced, creating and managing a sound policy becomes impossible. It's equally unfortunate that scientists employed by state and federal agencies lack the courage to publicly defend their work and the species they are trying to recover. Until strong, intelligent voices drown out the blowhards, emotions will rule, politicians

will call the shots and the public will be confused and frightened by rumor and misinformation.

This is cause for outrage, not apathy or despair. "It's reasonable to be pessimistic about wolf politics and management," says Robinson. "It's not reasonable based on their biology."

He's right: Let's not forget that the Southwest's wolves survived many years of strychnine poisoning and government bounties. Surely, they can survive the bullies, too.