

SUMMIT COUNTY CITIZEN VOICE

Wildlife: Republicans try to undermine Mexican wolf recovery

May 13, 2011

Will politics prevail over science?

by Bob Berwyn

Even as federal conservation biologists work to develop recovery goals for Mexican wolves, once plentiful in the Southwest, a group of Republican lawmakers from the West and Midwest is conspiring to prematurely remove Endangered Species Act protections for the rare species.

The introduction of H.R. 1819 follows last month's budget rider that arbitrarily removed wolves from the endangered species list in Montana, Idaho, Washington, Oregon and Utah, the first-ever congressional removal of Endangered Species Act protections for a species.

"The feds are declaring victory, but gray wolves still only survive in 5 percent of their former range, and even in those places they continue to face a real threat of persecution. Taking protection away from them now is premature and will impede the long-term recovery of wolves in the United States," said Noah Greenwald, endangered species program director at the Center for Biological Diversity.

The Endangered Species Act, in stark contrast to congressional whimsy, requires meeting scientific benchmarks to delist a species. H.R. 1819 would circumvent the act's clear mandate to recover species by allowing wolves to remain listed, but turning management over to states on an indefinite basis once the population reaches 100 animals. The measure drew immediate criticism from conservation advocates.



A Mexican wolf. PHOTO BY BRIAN GRATWICKE VIA THE CREATIVE COMMONS

This bill continues a disturbing trend of mostly Republican congresspersons trying to legislate what should be scientific decisions in order to do away with environmental protections," said Michael Robinson of the Center for Biological Diversity. "One hundred wolves is nowhere near a viable population and would leave Mexican wolves in constant danger of extinction."

The legislation would undermine an ongoing effort to develop a scientifically based recovery plan for the Mexican gray wolf to replace an outdated 1982 recovery plan. The 1982 plan did not include recovery targets because the Mexican wolf was considered too imperiled for such a goal to be envisioned at the time.

"The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is currently developing Mexican wolf recovery goals for the very first time," said Robinson. "There is absolutely no call for Congress to override this scientific process."

There are about 50 wolves spread between Arizona and New Mexico. Reaching 100 wolves was an interim benchmark of the recovery program, but the Fish and Wildlife Service has said on repeated occasions that it does not consider this to be a recovered population. Even the modest goal of 100 wolves, however, has not been met, largely because of heavy-handed management advocated by the states that calls for removal of wolves if they leave an arbitrary recovery area or are involved in depredation of livestock, which has led to many wolves being removed from the wild, injured or even killed.

This vicious bill is akin to ripping away life-support systems from an emergency-room patient just as soon as vital signs begin to stabilize," said Robinson. "The last thing that beautiful, wild, but very vulnerable Mexican wolves need is a resumption of persecution from the callous and misled Arizona Game and Fish Department, which is exactly what would happen if H.R. 1819 were to pass."