

ALBUQUERQUE JOURNAL



Thu, Jun 9, 2011

State Pulling Out of Wolf Program

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LAS CRUCES – The state Game and Fish Department will no longer participate in the controversial Mexican gray wolf recovery project.

In a departure from the previous board, the Game Commission, with four new members appointed by Gov. Susana Martinez, voted 6-0 Thursday to suspend the department's participation in the federal program as of June 30.

The move is not expected to have a major impact on the project going forward, but the board's decision was a important symbolic victory for ranchers, who have long complained about wolf depredations on livestock and voiced fears about threats to public safety.

"It means a lot to Catron County," said Catron County Commissioner Ben Griffin. "It's not stopping the program, but we have the support of the

state of New Mexico, which we have not had in the past."

Laura Schneberger, president of the Gila Livestock Growers Association, said the board's policy change was "good for morale, that's for sure."

"It shows support for the rural industries that are under siege right now," Schneberger said. "But I don't know how it will affect us immediately."

Under the resolution, the department will still comply with the state Wildlife Conservation Act, which requires Game and Fish to conduct a biennial review of the status of the wolf and dedicate law enforcement resources to protect the endangered species.

The Game Commission voted quickly after hearing about two hours of public comment. Like the divisive program itself, public comment was split, with ranchers, outfitters and their supporters calling the program a biological "failure" that has harmed ranchers financially,

while program advocates said wolves are a tourism draw and a key to restoring ecological balance in the area where they were virtually hunted into extinction.

Advocates also cited a 2008 Research & Polling survey that showed 69 percent of New Mexicans either strongly supported or somewhat supported the reintroduction program. Lobos were first released into southeast Arizona in 1998, and the population in Arizona and New Mexico reached 50 at the end of last year, with six packs and two lone wolves in this state.

In 2004, the Game Commission favored amending the Mexican wolf reintroduction rule in order to allow the direct release of captive-bred wolves into New Mexico. Under the current rule, only wolves previously captured in the wild can be released into New Mexico, and captive wolves may only be released initially into Arizona.

In April, Catron County officials asked Martinez to adopt a “no-wolf stand,” in contrast to her predecessor, Democrat Bill Richardson, who supported the wolf reintroduction project and in 2007 urged the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to suspend a policy requiring the removal of wolves that had killed three livestock in one year.

A letter sent Monday to Martinez on behalf of 13 state and national conservation organizations urged the governor to support ongoing planning for the wolf’s recovery, reaffirm support for the initial release of captive-bred wolves into New Mexico, and to oppose the removal of wolves from the wild except for veterinary purposes.

A report released last month by the U.S. Department of Agriculture said that predators caused the deaths of 5.5 percent of the nearly 4 million cattle and calves lost in the U.S. last year.

In New Mexico, wolves accounted for 2.4 percent of all the cattle lost to predators

last year, with coyotes accounting for 26 percent of those losses, mountain lions and bobcats 44 percent, dogs 1.7 percent, and other predators 22 percent.

The state’s contribution to the project overseen by Fish and Wildlife involves two employees who assist in trapping and transplant operations, collaring wolves, and carrying out projects aimed at reducing conflicts between the predators and livestock.

In addition, three to five conservation officers frequently assist in those activities, and administrative staff put a “significant amount” of time in attending meetings, contributing to wolf management decisions, and responding to records requests, according to a staff report.

Since 1999, the state has spent \$1.9 million on the wolf program, with three-fourths of the funds provided by the federal government