

Wolf hearing draws crowd of around 500 people

By Charles D. Brunt / Journal Staff Writer

Thu, Nov 21, 2013

Public comments on a pair of proposals by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service that would affect gray wolf recovery efforts nationwide ran about 2 to 1 in favor of expansion of the wolf recovery program, but cattle and sheep ranchers said the program is a failure and needs to be discontinued.

A near-capacity crowd of about 500 conservationists, ranchers, landowners and concerned citizens weighed in on the proposals during a three-hour public hearing here Wednesday at Embassy Suites. More than 100 of them signed up to make 2-minute comments on the proposals.

Gary Frazer, the agency's assistant director for ecological services, opened the hearing saying the goal of the proposed changes is "securing the species from the threat of extinction."

While those efforts have dramatically expanded the range of wolves in the Western Great Lakes and Northern Rocky Mountains, they are proving less effective on the Mexican wolf, he said.

Fish and Wildlife officials say reintroductions of the gray wolf in Minnesota, Michigan, Wisconsin, Wyoming, Montana and Idaho have been successful and they are no longer endangered. The agency estimates the number of gray wolves in the continental United States at more than 5,000.



Samia Grimida, a student at University of Texas at El Paso, left, and Tricia Snyder of Santa Teresa, right, march with a group of Mexican gray wolf supporters at a public hearing Wednesday on proposals to remove gray wolves from the endangered species list. (Marla Brose/Albuquerque Journal)

Several speakers cautioned the agency to weigh its actions carefully, with particular attention to potential economic impacts on New Mexico.

Others, like state Sen. Jerry Ortiz y Pino, D-Albuquerque, urged agency officials to "make decisions based on science," rather than political or any other basis. "Make that the hallmark of your decision-making," he said.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the agency charged with saving wolves from extinction, hopes to remove federal protection of gray wolves and to concentrate on the recovery on another wolf subspecies – the Mexican wolf.

Another proposal would revise a rule that classifies Mexican wolves as an “experimental population,” a designation that affects how the wolves are managed.

Conservation groups – which were well-represented at the public hearing – generally opposed removal of the gray wolf from the endangered species list and expressed concerns with other proposals affecting the Mexican wolf.

Las Cruces City Councilman Nathan Small said he thinks recovering the Mexican wolf would be beneficial to southern New Mexico, and that as an outdoorsman and hunter, he thinks the presence of wolves would enhance all outdoor experiences.



Kitty Randall of Jemez Springs listens to presentations during the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service hearing on the future of gray wolves and Mexican gray wolves. (Marla Brose/Journal)

Saying wolves are “vital to the health of the ecosystems” in which they have historically lived, outdoor writer Ruth Rudner urged expansion of the lands they are allowed to roam and claimed wolves have “become the scapegoat for increasingly anti-everything politics.”

Barbara Bacon of Albuquerque said she was concerned that the proposed changes “are not going to promote full recovery of the Mexican gray wolf.”

She also said she supports expansion of the wolf recovery area as far south as the Mexican border because “wolves can’t read maps.”

Citing losses of livestock to wolf depredation, ranching groups – also well-represented at the hearing – strongly back federal efforts to remove gray wolves from the list of endangered species, even though they typically receive compensation from the federal government for livestock losses attributed to wolves.

Rex Wilson with the New Mexico Cattle Growers Association and Caren Cowan with the New Mexico Wool Growers Association said wolf reintroduction in New Mexico had failed and needs to be discontinued.

“There is ample scientific evidence for removing the gray and Mexican wolves from the endangered species list,” Wilson said.

“After 15 years, it is clear the experiment has failed,” he said, adding that there is not enough wildlife in New Mexico to justify restoring wolves here.

He and Cowan said they support taking not only the gray wolf from the endangered species list, but the Mexican wolf as well.

“This experiment has gone on too long,” Cowan said, adding that the program “is not working for anyone, especially them (the wolves).”

Michael Robinson with the Center for Biological Diversity expressed concerns about a lack of biological diversity among the existing wolf population in New Mexico and said it's Fish and Wildlife's fault for limiting their reintroductions.

The Mexican wolf was added to the federal endangered species list in 1976. Efforts to reintroduce them in the Southwest have stumbled due to legal battles, politics, illegal shootings and other problems. Since reintroduction efforts began in 1998, more than 50 illegal wolf killings have been documented.

The Mexican gray wolf recovery area includes 3.3 million acres in the Gila National Forest and 1.1 million acres in the Apache National Forest in Arizona. Tribal or private lands adjacent to those areas can also allow wolves on their lands, such as the Ted Turner-owned Ladder Ranch in New Mexico and the White Mountain Apache Tribe's Fort Apache Indian Reservation in Arizona.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service officials said there are about 75 Mexican gray wolves in the recovery area, and only three breeding pairs.

In August, the Center for Biological Diversity reached a settlement agreement with the Fish and Wildlife Service that allows direct release of captive-bred wolves into the Gila National Forest and permits wolves to roam over a broader area than is currently allowed. The agreement requires Fish and Wildlife to finalize a rule authorizing those moves by Jan. 12, 2015.

The Center also objects to a proposal that would require removal of any Mexican gray wolf found north of Interstate 40 or south of Interstate 10, saying it would prevent the establishment of new, genetically diverse populations of wolves in the southern Rocky Mountains, the Grand Canyon ecosystem and in Mexico.

The public comment period for the proposed changes, originally set to expire on Sept. 11, has been extended through Dec. 17. For more information, go to www.fws.gov/home/wolfrecovery.