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Bureaucracy stalks gray wolves' return to Colorado

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A trail camera in November captured an image of one member of a small pack of wild wolves identified by the state of Colorado last year. Defenders of Wildlife

Colorado voters approved an unusual ballot measure last fall, overruling state wildlife officials to mandate the return of gray wolves to the Centennial State.

But before any paws can hit the ground — which the ballot measure requires to start no later than Dec. 31, 2023 — the state must wade through its own planning process, and early steps have sparked alarm among advocates over whether the state is dragging its feet.

"Given that wolf reintroduction is a well-established science, we're not asking the state to reinvent the wheel," said Rob Edward, a strategic adviser with Rocky Mountain Wolf Project, an advocacy group.

Instead, Edward characterized initial steps by the Colorado Parks and Wildlife Commission as "lackluster."

"We certainly hoped that by now the state would really be engaging the planning process in earnest," he added, pointing to a planning [document](#) the commission released last month.

According to the state's timeline, draft management plans would be released in mid-2022, and then again in mid-2023, followed by public comment periods. A final plan would be finished in December 2023.

That schedule would make it all but impossible to meet the mandate approved by voters, Edward said.

"We would argue they have a legal obligation to have a plan in place, and enough time, by the end of 2022 at least, at least a draft plan that shows they intend to have the first round of wolves on the ground by the end of 2023," he explained.

During an online public meeting about the wolf reintroduction yesterday, at least one state official echoed some of those criticisms.

Colorado Department of Natural Resources Executive Director Dan Gibbs noted the state could rely on a prior planning effort, pointing to an extensive 2004 report on the management of wolves migrating into the state from Wyoming and Utah.

"I feel like we're not starting from scratch necessarily," Gibbs said at the state wildlife commission's second online "Workshop on Wolf Reintroduction Planning." He called the 2004 plan "extremely well done."

"I would urge us to have more than just an outline of a plan because we really want folks to have some meaningful information to chew on, frankly," he added. "We're receiving a lot of information, but we have to be clear on what the voters intend ... that we have wolves on the landscape by Dec. 31, 2023."

There are already at least a few wolves in Colorado. Following years of wolf sightings in the state, Colorado officials confirmed a six-member pack in early 2020 near the borders of Wyoming and Utah. That pack has since diminished in size, but wildlife cameras captured images of two of its remaining members in November.

Edward isn't the only reintroduction proponent raising concerns. Wildlife advocates — dozens of individuals representing the Sierra Club, the Center for Biological Diversity, the American Renewable Energy Institute and other organizations — voiced similar concerns in a **letter** last week to Colorado Gov. Jared Polis (D).

"As conceived, the process is complicated, expensive and time-consuming," the letter states. It also criticized the state wildlife commission for adopting a plan that will require both a stakeholder advisory group and a technical working group, describing the process as "cumbersome."

The latter group will include representatives from federal agencies like the Fish and Wildlife Service and the Bureau of Land Management, as well as the state Agriculture Department.

But advocates warned the stakeholder group — with representatives of the state's livestock producers as well as hunters, wolf advocates, environmental interests and local elected officials — could become a forum for those who opposed the ballot measure.

"You are inviting those with opposing viewpoints to line up at the microphone and repeat the campaign debate," Norman Bishop, a retired National Park Service official, testified yesterday at the online meeting.

Bishop, who previously served as a resource interpreter at Yellowstone National Park and co-authored an environmental impact statement that led to the 1995 reintroduction of wolves there, argued the state should have released its own draft plan before seeking any public comment.

Reid DeWalt, an assistant director at Colorado Parks and Wildlife, defended the working groups, saying critics need to look at the individuals who will be part of the process, not the organizations that were selected.

"The more important part of it is who is appointed to those groups and not exactly who they represent," he said.

Still, Edward said he remains concerned the panel — particularly if it is evenly weighted with both proponents and opponents of the wolves' return — could become buried in "endless stakeholder negotiations."

"If you're going to do the stakeholder process, you have to make sure the pro-wolf side is more heavily represented than not," he asserted.

'Geography matters'

Gray wolves were eradicated in Colorado in the 1940s. Advocates of returning them to the wild expect that between 20 and 30 of the animals could be released in Colorado in 2023, followed by another 15 animals in the subsequent four-year period ([Greenwire](#), Oct. 14, 2020).

Under the terms of the ballot measure, the animals will be released on land west of the Continental Divide, an area known as the state's Western Slope.

But local officials from that region emphasized yesterday that while the ballot measure, formally known as Proposition 114, eked out a narrow victory across the state, it did not win majorities in their counties ([Greenwire](#), Nov. 4, 2020).

"Context and geography matters here," Garfield County Commissioner Mike Samson told the wildlife commission during its virtual meeting. His county, which includes former Interior Secretary David Bernhardt's hometown of Rifle, Colo., borders Utah.

He likewise pressed for the inclusion of affected counties in the stakeholder group, adding: "To simply relegate the counties to the roll of commenter is disingenuous at best and a divisive tragedy at worst."

Saguache County Commissioner Timothy Lovato echoed those concerns, while adding criticism that the wolves could negatively affect elk, bighorn sheep and other large game if not controlled.

"How does the commission or Parks and Wildlife keep wolves from going south of I-70 and east over the Continental Divide?" asked Lovato, whose county is located in southern Colorado, west of Pueblo.

Commission members discussed options like holding public sessions in each congressional district in the state, along with multiple meetings in the sprawling 3rd District that covers the entire Western Slope.

"We're very early in the process," said commission Chair Marvin McDaniel. "Here's a lot of strong commitment by every commissioner to involve the folks on the Western Slope, or anywhere, that's going to be affected by this."

Among the first steps in the state's process will be an "education and listening tour" in the coming months, aimed at gathering input on conservation and management priorities.

Topics at those sessions could include how other Western states have handled wolf reintroduction, such as procuring the animals as well as successes and failures of those programs.

"These education sessions are not meant to relitigate issues, they're meant to educate," McDaniel said.