

State commission planning wolf reintroduction putting stakeholder feedback ahead of speed

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STEAMBOAT SPRINGS — The commission tasked by voters to develop a plan to reintroduce gray wolves in Colorado by the end of 2023 reportedly will take its time to gather feedback from a wide variety of stakeholders.

The prodding pace has garnered pushback from supporters of reintroduction who say such a long process could make the Colorado Parks and Wildlife Commission miss the deadline set by voters in November for wolves to be released.

“We’re very early in the process,” Commission Chair Marvin McDaniel said. “There is a lot of strong commitment by every commissioner to involve the folks on the Western Slope or anywhere that is going to be affected by this.”

Proposition 114 was passed by less than 2 percentage points and just 13 of the 64 counties in Colorado supported the measure. Of the 22 counties west of the Continental Divide, where wolves will be introduced, just five supported the measure, including Summit County.

In January, the commission approved a framework plan from Colorado Parks and Wildlife staff laying out a process to engage with communities that will be affected. But a [letter from supporters of reintroduction](#) sent to the commission earlier this month says that process is “perilously cumbersome.”

The letter stressed that in the current framework, wolves would not start to be released until December 2023, leaving just one month to actually release them.

Norman Bishop, a national park ranger for 36 years who was involved with wolf reintroduction in Yellowstone National Park, criticized the process, saying it will be “inviting those with opposing viewpoints to line up at the microphone and repeat the campaign debate.”

Bishop suggested staff should draft the reintroduction plan and then get public comment on that draft. But some ranchers who don't favor wolf reintroduction say the process should be thorough and allow scientists at Parks and Wildlife to craft the best possible plan.

"... Our biggest concern as cattlemen and (agriculture) people out here is trying to make sure that we are not rushing the process and that we are taking time to adequately understand the impacts and not just haphazardly move forward," rancher and former Routt County Commissioner Doug Monger said.

In the coming months, the commission will have educational sessions for those on the panel to provide them with the basic knowledge needed to properly engage in reintroduction discussions.

Topics of these sessions will include how wolves will impact producers, the tools they have to prevent wolves from causing damage to producers, how they will monitor wolves, how they will affect other species and how reintroduction efforts have gone in other states.

Terry Fankhauser, executive vice president of the Colorado Cattlemen's Association, told the commission it also needed to address the indirect cause of conflict between wolves and livestock.

"If you have a cat that is scared of dogs, then you have that cat around a bunch of dogs, well, it doesn't really do too well," Monger said. "It is under constant stress. It doesn't eat well. It doesn't drink well. The same thing happens with livestock."

That stress can cause lower gestation rates and even weight loss, Monger said, because the cows are constantly looking out for a predator.

Jay Fetcher, who ranches in North Routt County near Hahns Peak, said he would expect to lose about two to three calves each year but said the indirect costs could be steeper.

"Right now, our cows are so comfortable," Fetcher said. "They know where the gates are. They know where they are safe. If there were wolves in the mix, I fear it would be us getting back on horses. Right now, we move the cows on bicycles."

This would result in a lot more "cowboying," Fetcher said. Right now, they check on their cattle every four or five days, but when wolves are in the area, he would expect a decent amount of each day to be devoted to watching over cattle, potentially requiring him to hire another hand.

Fetcher also is worried stressed cattle will congregate in the same places, not spreading out their impact on U.S. Forest Service land as widely as required by the permits that allow them to graze cattle there.

The ballot question passed in November requires the state to hold listening sessions across the state to explain the plan. Colorado Department of Natural Resources Executive Director Dan Gibbs, a former Summit County commissioner, said the state has heard from several Western Slope organizations looking to host listening sessions, adding that they want to start right away.

The preference is these meetings would be in person, but Gibbs stressed that stakeholders can't let the pandemic slow the process down. He suggested setting up meetings with county commissioners to reach some of the Western Slope communities.

Gibbs also stressed the need to present people with more details than just an outline of the plan to reintroduce wolves, saying it would provide properly informed feedback.

"We're not starting from scratch necessarily," Gibbs said. "We have our 2004 plan that I think was 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."

This story is from SteamboatPilot.com.