

## Senators seek plan to help bring back the beavers and protect wetlands



A young beaver swims in the Santa Fe River near Frenchy's Field Park and the Camino Carlos Rael crossing in 2005. Courtesy photo



A beaver was spotted on the Santa Fe River south of the Camino Alire bridge in April 2007, when the river was flowing. New Mexican file photo

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Wildlife biologists contend beavers could be the most low-tech, inexpensive answer that drought-plagued New Mexico has for storing up precious water and rescuing dwindling wetlands— but some of the animals are still killed every year by people who consider them nuisances.

The state Senate is considering a memorial sponsored by Sens. Tim Keller, D-Albuquerque, and Bobby Gonzales, D-Taos, asking several agencies to develop a statewide beaver-management plan to rein in conflicts between property owners and unwanted animals and to support populations where beavers are needed. Senate Memorial 4 passed the Senate Rules Committee Thursday and is scheduled to be heard next in the Conservation Committee.

“I’d like to see New Mexico craft an intentional beaver-management plan like Utah has,” said Bryan Bird, Wild Places Program director for the Santa Fe-based nonprofit WildEarth Guardians. “It would be a solution to a lot of problems. Right now, there’s no logic to how we manage beavers.”

Beaver dams hold back streams and create ponds. Those ponds store water, create wetlands, recharge aquifers, support wildlife habitat and slow down floods, reducing erosion, wildlife biologists say. About 82 percent of the state’s streams on public land could support beavers, according to a recent wetlands habitat study Bird coordinated, which was funded by the New Mexico Environment Department.

But many streams have few or no beavers. In the wetlands study, Bird’s team used geographical information systems modeling and field surveys to map suitable beaver habitat. In the Jemez Mountains alone, they found 18 streams without any beavers.

Bird and others hope a statewide beaver-management plan would help move nuisance beavers to streams where they could do some good but have fewer conflicts with people.

Beavers become targets when encroach on private land. Farmers blame them for stopping up irrigation ditches and causing floods, and other property owners get frustrated when the animals chew down their trees.

Beavers are considered aquatic rodents by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. In New Mexico, beavers are fur-bearing animals managed by the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish. The department allows hunters to trap or shoot a limited number of beavers each year.

A private property owner with an unwanted beaver can call the Game and Fish Department or the state office of the USDA’s Wildlife Services, which will trap or shoot the animal if it is deemed a problem. While the Game and Fish Department

acknowledges the benefits beavers have for wetlands, the agency also is supposed to prevent wildlife from damaging private property.

In fiscal year 2011, Wildlife Services killed or euthanized more than 27,000 nuisance or injured beavers in 44 states and relocated 177. In New Mexico, Wildlife Services has killed or relocated an average of 30 beavers a year. In 2012-13, licensed trappers also harvested 121 beavers.

Beavers lived in all perennial waters in New Mexico until the late 1880s. Their numbers steadily declined due to trapping, development, livestock grazing and loss of habitat.

Without beavers, the ponds that helped store up water on many stream systems dwindled, according to another recent study on the ecological benefits of beaver dams, conducted by New Mexico State University researchers. The study found only 40 active beaver dams on streams on public lands in the state in 2013, according to Jennifer Frey, an associate professor and one of the study's authors. She said beaver were "functionally extinct" in the state because "they are so sparsely distributed that they are not able to perform the vital ecosystem services that would improve the health of our streams."

A 2011 report from the state Department of Game and Fish, the USDA and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said there was evidence of beavers on 2,200 miles of riparian habitat in New Mexico. Population estimates for beavers in the state range from 5,254 to 11,676 animals.

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