

Wolf supporters, foes debate issue

Terence Corrigan - The Independent |
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Jess Carey from Reserve, N.M., raises his hand with a question for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife officials during a question-and-answer session before the formal hearing. Carey is a well-known opponent of the Mexican gray wolf reintroduction program. Carey owns a gun shop in Reserve and he works for the Catron County Sheriff's Department as the wolf interaction and wildlife investigator. Catron County maintains a toll free "wolf hotline." The number is (800) 704-2281.

expanding the Mexican gray wolf territory, although most thought the newly proposed boundaries were still too limited.

Bob Brister, who came all the way from Salt Lake City for the hearing, spoke in favor of no boundaries. "We need a robust population," he said, "more releases. We need to allow wolves to migrate back to Utah. Wolves will help the ecosystems."

Without a doubt, the youngest person to testify was pre-teen Brianna Edwards, who said simply, "I think they should run free and go where they want."

HONDAH — The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is proposing sweeping changes to the gray wolf management programs and the public comments for and against the proposals Dec. 3 once again showed clearly the sharp divisions between the two sides, although some wolf opponents did express an apparent willingness to seek compromise.

Over 400 people showed up at the Hon-Dah Conference Center for a hearing on the proposals. Just over 50 people were given two minutes each to testify. Many had much more to say, but hearing officer Leslie Travers kept a tight rein on the proceedings and cut everyone off at the two-minute mark.

"This is a damn joke," commented one speaker whose comments were cut short.

The proposed changes to the plan include a significant increase in the size of the area where Mexican wolves would be allowed to roam: almost two-thirds of Arizona, from the Mexican border in the south to I-40 in the north.

On one side of the political fence, the supporters of wolf reintroduction expressed support for

On other side of the fence, opponents to the wolf reintroduction program did not want to see the wolves “invade” new territories. Several speakers from the Payson area vigorously opposed the plan that would allow wolves in the Tonto National Forest.

Gila County Supervisor Tommie Martin supported the idea of expanding the Mexican wolf range “border to border” in Arizona, but did not want them released in her region’s backyard. “I do not want them to be released in the Tonto (National Forest),” she said. Martin said she didn’t mind wolves if they drifted into the area after having presumably become more experienced, wild-wolf-like, but she opposed new releases of unseasoned animals.

Terry Wheeler, mayor of Globe, was strident in his opposition to an expanded wolf range.

Wheeler said wolves in Gila County would harm the health and welfare of people and “destroy our outdoor recreation.” Wheeler said if the range is expanded, “wolves will soon be in Scottsdale.”

The area where wolves could be initially released is also up for an increase. “Initial release” of a wolf is the first time release of one that has been raised in captivity. For the first 15 years of the program, initial release of wolves has been allowed in one fairly small area of the Apache Forest. Wolf program managers have said that this has created a bottleneck, because wolves already in the release area are not accepting of newcomers in their territory.

The proposed expansion of the initial release area received only a few favorable comments in passing and those in opposition to the changes were more focused on criticism of continued federal Endangered Species Act protection for the Mexican wolf.

The gray wolves released in the northern Rockies and in the Great Lakes region have been de-listed and those populations are now managed by state wildlife departments, most of which have initiated annual wolf hunts.

Hunting groups and livestock producers want the Mexican wolves to be de-listed, which would then put the wolves under state management.

(Fish and Wildlife is also proposing to de-list wolves who wander out of the northwest states into Colorado, Utah and Nevada.)

The difference between the northern populations and the Southwest group, however, is numbers. There are, according to the January 2013 count, around 75 Mexican wolves in the wild. There are thousands of their northern cousins.

Apache County Supervisor Barry Weller, who said he was speaking also for Bucky Allred, a Catron County, N.M., supervisor, expressed support for de-listing the Mexican wolf.

According to Mike Hobbs, a rancher from Colfax County, N.M., Fish and Wildlife’s wolf program is failing because they are not working with the ranchers. The ranching community has been coexisting with other predators, he said, “because of state management. We do not like what you are doing. We want common sense put back in wildlife management. Please cooperate with us; we are trying to cooperate with you.”

Hobbs’ impassioned speech drew a round of applause, the first of the evening, but it was cut short with a rebuke from hearing officer Travers.

Two proposed changes to the wolf management program drew no commentary: to take a small sliver of northwest Texas out of the wolf recovery area and to remove the White Sands Missile Range as an acceptable initial release area.

There was no one riding the fence about wolves and many of those who commented had little to say about the issue at hand.

Jim DeTro, a county commissioner Okanogon County in Washington state, spoke vehemently about the “wanton destruction of the multimillion dollar timber industry,” caused by the Endangered Species Act listing of the spotted owl. He said it was “junk science” that was used in that instance.

Several speakers said that the “prey base” in Arizona was insufficient to support a large population of wolves. They claimed that with insufficient prey animals, wolves would be more likely to kill livestock.

Some like Arizona State Sen. Gail Griffin spoke of the “mental anguish” people experience with the presence of wolves. “Hundreds of people have contacted me,” she said. Griffin said the Fish and Wildlife officials have failed in their work by not contacting the people who live on the ground in the wolf recovery area. “It’s easy to sit in Washington, D.C., and look at a map,” she said.

A couple of people brought up the danger wolves present to humans, especially children.

Jerry Grimes with the Arizona Elks Club said he opposes an expanded area for wolves because it presents a danger to the children who attend the Elks Youth Camp south of Payson.

In a question-and-answer session before the formal hearing, John Bennett’s question drew applause. “At what point do we put humans above wolves?” he asked.

Earl Cochran with the Round Valley group, the Wildlife Habitat Committee, also questioned what would happen if a child is killed by wolves.

Arizona Sen. Judy Burges said, without equivocation, that wolves present “inherent risks to humans, livestock and wildlife.

“Surely one of you has a moral compass that will not allow this?” she said.

Sandy Bahr with the Grand Canyon Chapter of the Sierra Club said that the current management rules are too restrictive and result in “management that’s a detriment to the wolves” who are threatened by “government shooting and trapping” and inbreeding.

Carey Dobson, who ranches in the Springerville/Vernon area, has been on the forefront of working with various organizations on preventative measures to lessen wolf problems. The results, he said, have been mixed. Dobson got out of the sheep business but still runs cattle. “This year’s been bad,” he said, “with over 12 (confirmed) depredations. And we didn’t find them all.”

There’s still “a lot of issues,” unresolved, he said. “We are not getting any help.”

Retired school teacher Dorothy Reed-Inman, like several people, spoke in favor of more extensive wolf ranges — into the Grand Canyon and southern Utah and Colorado.

“My voice counts too,” she said. “It will help restore the vegetation. It all fits together, it’s all part of nature’s plan.”

One of the more strident supporters of wolves was Oliver Starr, who commented right at the end of the hearing. Starr said he had grown up on a ranch in the “culture of hatred of wolves,” but as a grown-up he has spent the last 30 years raising wolves.

“These animals are not an experiment,” he said. “Wolves are more humane than humans.

“Cattle are damaging the environment,” he said. “Cows are the invasive species. Wolves don’t need to be managed. They manage themselves.”

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