

News Articles Cited in Friends of Wild Animals Comment letter in Response to the Pusch Ridge Helicopter Draft EA

Anti-wolf bills clear case of over-reaction

March 06, 2014 6:00 am

Talk about over-reacting.

The last time we visited the topic of endangered Mexican gray wolves in this space was to call for more details of a proposed expansion plan and consultation by federal officials with local communities.

That was back in August, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service did agree to at least one public hearing in Arizona and entered talks with state Game and Fish officials.

But some state lawmakers took the expansion plan as a call to arms, and this winter they have introduced bills seeking not only to hamstring or kill off the recovery program but end the entire federal Endangered Species Act in Arizona.

The last was introduced by Flagstaff Rep. Bob Thorpe, who later withdrew that clause after staff officials said it would compromise tens of millions of dollars in federal aid given to the state for protecting endangered species and habitat restoration under their many cooperative agreements. Those programs include the California condor, black-footed ferret, Chiricahua leopard frog, native fish and other species.

He also took out the part about deporting any animal species in a federal recovery program not “cooperatively implemented” with the state, a direct assault on federal authority over endangered species.

But Thorpe did retain a clause in the bill calling on the federal government to establish a compensation fund for cattle losses, then turn it over to the state to be administered on state terms.

Other bills and resolutions would allow state employees for the first time to kill a problem wolf on public land, cap the number of wolves at 100 and relocate them to Mexico. And when the bills are inevitably challenged in court, another bill calls for a \$250,000 litigation fund to be set up to defend them.

If the measures above came in response to hundreds of marauding wolves decimating cattle herds, we'd pay attention. But just the opposite true: There are about 80 wolves in the wild and the number of claims made by ranchers for wolf depredation is minuscule. Most cattle are killed by disease and by predators with much larger populations, such as coyotes or mountain lions. But if a cow is killed, there is a compensation fund in place and one proposal calls on ranchers to be paid extra simply for sharing their leased land with wolves.

Further, public opinion is solidly behind the wolves, not the ranchers. Poll after poll shows most citizens believe there is plenty of room on the national forest for cows and wolves with sensible management.

Does that mean we're satisfied with the management plan to date and the expansion proposal? On the latter, we feel Fish and Wildlife owes residents of communities in the expansion zone (which extends northward to Interstate 40) some answers to specific questions:

— How often would they anticipate that wolves establishing new territories would roam into suburbs and other settled areas?

- How would wolves interact with pet dogs in particular?
- What tactics and strategies could be employed to keep those human-wolf contacts to a minimum?

These are the issues that lawmakers ought to be focusing on as part of diversifying and preserving Arizona's wildlife heritage. Wolves are part of that heritage, and they deserve a chance to stay.

State: No Mexican gray wolves for Flagstaff area

May 11, 2014 5:00 am • [ERIC BETZ Sun Staff Reporter](#)

A collection of hunting advocacy groups have signed onto a plan with the Arizona Department of Game and Fish, calling Mexican gray wolf recovery impossible in the Southwest without habitat in Mexico. The plan seeks to create a corridor that would allow wolves to head toward Mexico and disperse.

Conservationists said the state plan is not based on science and would harm efforts to re-establish wolves in the Southwest.

Game and Fish bases its plan on a contested claim that 90 percent of the Mexican gray wolf historical range lies south of the U.S. border. The state plan would restrict habitat north of the border to areas it defines as historical habitat.

The state agency would also keep wolves from reaching Flagstaff and all areas west of Payson because they have a poor “prey base” and are too heavily populated with humans. The plan says that the North Rim of Grand Canyon National Park, as well as Colorado and Utah, should not be used because they are outside the historical range of the wolf.

But the state’s idea that Mexican wolves should stay in a restricted historical region, including south of Interstate 40, contrasts with a scientific research as well as a draft recovery plan leaked from U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service several years ago.

Researchers studying wolf genetics at the University of California Los Angeles found that northern gray wolves wandered as far south as Arizona and Mexican wolves roamed north in Utah and Colorado. Their genetics were mixed and biologists say they can’t rule out that Mexican gray wolves might have originally come south from Canada.

APEX PREDATOR

In a statement sent to the Daily Sun, Arizona Game and Fish Department Director Larry Voyles said that the agency’s plan could potentially increase the proposed wolf population from “not less than 100” to as many as several hundred. The population is currently 83 animals, but the leading cause of death continues to be illegal shootings.

“The biggest impediment to the Mexican wolf reintroduction effort in the Southwest isn’t biologically based. It’s social tolerance for an apex predator on today’s modern landscape that must support such a wide variety of conservation, recreation and economic uses,” said chairman of the Arizona Game and Fish Commission J.W. Harris in a prepared statement. “This alternative represents the first time such a broad-based group has come together for Mexican wolf conservation, and it goes a long ways to enhancing social tolerance and, in turn, successful conservation of the species.”

Among the groups listed as “critical stakeholders” on the Game and Fish plan are some two dozen ranching and hunting groups like Phoenix Varmint Callers Inc., a club dedicated to killing predators, and Big Game Forever. The latter was audited after receiving hundreds of thousands of dollars from the Utah state government to fight wolf recovery efforts.

“It pretty well totally ignores the best available science,” said Kim Crumbo, Conservation Director with the Grand Canyon Wildlands Council.

Crumbo is a stakeholder on Fish and Wildlife's Mexican gray wolf recovery plan. "That's not enough wolves to ensure their long-term survival," Crumbo said. "It would result eventually in their extirpation and eventual extinction."

TWO WOLVES REACH FLAGstaff

The state's plan, released last month, is being offered as an alternative to the proposal floated by Fish and Wildlife to allow Mexican gray wolves to roam between Interstates 40 and 10 in Arizona and New Mexico. That plan is currently in its draft Environmental Impact Statement phase.

As the U.S. government seeks to delist the gray wolf, it's trying to find a new strategy for the beleaguered Mexican gray wolf recovery program. The smaller subspecies was extinct in the wild when Fish and Wildlife started reintroducing it to a small patch of land in the White Mountains of Arizona and New Mexico in 1998.

Researchers say that large chunks of land outside the recovery area could support wolves, but the animals that have left in the past have been brought back by wildlife officials or illegally killed. Two wolves have made it to the Flagstaff area. One was hit by a car on Highway 89 north of Flagstaff; the other was shot illegally after roaming as far as Mormon Lake.

There remain more captive wolves than wolves in the wild.

The state's plan calls on the federal government to minimize introducing captive-born wolves to the wild and instead relocate existing wolves to desired new locations.

"Any effort by USFWS to expand Mexican gray wolf presence in AZ-NM to a broader area or to greater numbers than are set forth in this Alternative may be aggressively litigated by one or more entities among the Cooperating Agencies and the supporting stakeholders," the plan by Arizona Game and Fish reads.

1,000 WOLVES 'UNACCEPTABLE'

Prior to the Mexican wolf being killed off in the wild, animals were found as far east as western Texas.

The leaked Fish and Wildlife document also outlines research that supports allowing the Mexican gray wolf to expand into the northern reaches of New Mexico and Arizona, as well as portions of Utah and Colorado, including the Rocky Mountains. The researchers contend that, regardless of historical range, endangered species are often introduced to areas where the habitat is suitable. A group of conservation scientists studying the area found that as many as 1,000 wolves could survive within three distinct populations.

That number has not been taken well by state wildlife managers, who see it as a threat to sport hunting and trapping in Arizona. The state's plan suggests killing wolves if their population grows large enough to kill more than 15 percent of prey like elk and deer.

"The numbers suggested to date by USFWS of 900 to a thousand or more are unrealistic, unmanageable and unacceptable," the state and its partners wrote in their plan.

Eric Betz can be reached at 556-2250 or ebetz@azdailysun.com.

Alternative plan for wolf reintroduction

— Cooperating Agencies

Arizona Game and Fish Department

Eastern Arizona Counties Organization

Gila County

Graham County

Greenlee County

Navajo County

— Stakeholders in support of plan as basis for further discussion:

Anglers United

Arizona Antelope Foundation

Arizona BASS

Arizona Big Game Super Raffle

Arizona Cattle Growers' Association

Arizona Chapter of the National Wild Turkey Federation

Arizona Deer Association

Arizona Desert Bighorn Sheep Society

Arizona Elk Society

Arizona Houndsmen

Arizona Sportsmen for Wildlife Conservation

Arizona Trappers Association

Arizona Wildlife Federation

Big Game Forever

ES Advisement, LLC (AZ)

Coconino Sportsmen

Outdoor Experience 4 All

Phoenix Varmint Callers, Inc.

Sportsmen's Constituent Group

The BASS Federation

The Mule Deer Foundation

Yuma Valley Rod & Gun Club

1-2-3-Go

Bad Habitat

Critics call Arizona Game and Fish antiquated and anti-predator

By [Tim Vanderpool](#)



In an era when life splashes spontaneously across YouTube, the Arizona Game and Fish Commission is still grappling with dot-matrix.

Consider that the commission does not stockpile digital videos of its monthly meetings, where sweeping management decisions about Arizona's wildlife are pondered.

That means folks who can't ditch work to attend these Phoenix parleys—or watch them on live webcasts—must cool their heels until the minutes are released months later. Or they can submit a public records request for audio recordings. The digital files are dispatched in five-minute increments, making it impossible to know who's saying what.

Then again, perhaps this is limited access by design.

Which leads us to the policies of a commission that critics consider far more concerned with nourishing the hunting industry than protecting all wildlife—including endangered species that once roamed Arizona. This is particularly true, they say, when it comes to big predators such as the border jaguar and Mexican gray wolf.

That's not much of a reach. Most if not all current commissioners are longtime members of the NRA and influential hunting groups such as the Arizona Desert Bighorn Sheep Society and Safari Club International. The Safari Club, which operates the International Wildlife Museum in Tucson, has been linked to unethical hunting practices and efforts to weaken endangered species protections.

Nor is this lopsided margin surprising given that hunting groups three years ago successfully pushed for creation of the Arizona Game and Fish Commission Appointment Recommendation Board. The board screens potential commissioners before submitting three finalists for the governor's consideration. Among the board members is former AGF commissioner Sue Chilton, a Southern Arizona rancher notorious for her vitriolic opposition to reintroduction of large predators such as the Mexican gray wolf. It also includes Hays Gilstrap, another former commissioner and husband to Suzanne Gilstrap, who happens to be the lobbyist for a group called Arizona Sportsmen for Wildlife Conservation.

Suzanne Gilstrap's group was not only the prime mover behind creation of the recommendation board, but also subsequently forwarded her spouse as its preferred appointee.

Critics contend that this cozy club skews Arizona's wildlife policies. Among those detractors is Daniel Patterson, a former state lawmaker and currently Southwest director with Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, or PEER. Patterson says his contacts within the Game and Fish Department describe an agency where morale is abysmal and shepherding the interests of hunting groups remains paramount.

That's hardly new; as a legislator, Patterson floated efforts to change the name of the Game and Fish Department to the Arizona Department of Wildlife. "The reason I did that was to remind them that their responsibility was for all wildlife," he says, "not just game and sports fish. Unfortunately, that message seems to be lost.

"A lot of hunters are pro-predator and want to see habitat protection. But the commission doesn't want to hear from those conservation voices. They want to hear from the more exploitative side," such as professional hunting guides and organizations.

For a case in point, Patterson and other conservationists note what they consider the commission's ongoing hostility toward Mexican gray wolf reintroduction.

Given that there are probably fewer than 50 Mexican gray wolves in the wild, folks were a tad surprised in 2010 when the commission threw its weight behind yanking the animals from federal endangered species protection.

Commissioners have also opposed establishing critical habitat for the border jaguar, despite at least five Southern Arizona sightings of the big cats in recent years.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service initially sided with Arizona in opposing habitat designation—until it was ordered by a federal judge to change course.

Following a lawsuit by Defenders of Wildlife and the Tucson-based Center for Biological Diversity, the late U.S. District Judge John Roll demanded that the agency develop a recovery plan and designate critical habitat.

Last fall, Fish and Wildlife finally proposed some 1,300 square miles in Arizona and New Mexico as habitat critical for jaguar recovery. That range includes the site of a Canadian company's proposed strip mine in the Santa Rita Mountains south of Tucson.

Today, Game and Fish Commissioner Jack Husted remains among the most vocal critics of critical habitat. Known for his cowboy hats and trenchant commentary, Husted hails from Springerville in northeastern Arizona. Coincidentally, Springerville is perched next to the Mexican gray wolf recovery zone, and opposition to the project there runs deep.

Nonetheless, Husted takes issue with folks who call him anti-predator. "But what I am against is allowing the emotion involved in predators to make habitat management decisions we need to manage all wildlife," he says. "I don't want to let the wolf or the mountain lion or any other predator get any special treatment, just because he's got a lot of followers on Twitter."

That also applies to the jaguar, says Husted, who downplays the District Court's habitat decision. "A judge telling U.S. Fish and Wildlife to go do something doesn't change the Arizona Game and Fish position," he says.

Among comments submitted to U.S. Fish and Wildlife in October, the Arizona Game and Fish Department argued that critical habitat was not warranted "because habitat essential to the conservation of the jaguar as a species does not exist in either Arizona or New Mexico under any scientifically credible definition of that term."

Environmentalists call that ridiculous. "The jaguar evolved in the United States before it was the United States," says Michael Robinson of the Center for Biological Diversity. "The jaguar was native to this continent before it expanded its range to the south. They were found from the Carolinas to California. The question is whether we are going to take any steps to protect a tiny bit of habitat on the edge of what was a huge swath of habitat."

Sergio Avila is a wildlife biologist with the conservation group Sky Island Alliance, which has photographed several jaguars just south of the border in Sonora, Mexico. "In terms of the jaguar it doesn't really matter if you're in Mexico or the United States," he says. "The point is, jaguars are here. We have records of jaguars going back over 100 years, and we have records of jaguars going back just a month ago. It's time to learn from our past mistakes and do something in terms of recovery of this species."

Still, Game and Fish commissioners certainly don't seem to consider past decisions as mistakes. And given the difficulty of accessing details about their earlier meetings, an observer might conclude that these gentlemen much prefer making decisions in an echo chamber of the like-minded.

"I've got to say that the sportsmen or whatever groups *have* been coming and sitting in front of us for years," Husted says. "I guess to spend departmental resources to make it easy for everybody, we could get pretty carried away."

AZ Game and Fish Commission Approves Extreme Hunting Proposals

Submitted by Stephanie Nichols... on December 14, 2011 - 6:16pm

At its December 2011 meeting, the Arizona Game and Fish Commission



continued its anti-predator policies, approving night hunting of coyotes and cougars; "English-Style" fox, rabbit and coyote hunting and putting up more road blocks to the reintroduction of Mexican gray wolves.

"It was a disappointing, but not surprising day", said Animal Defense League of Arizona president Stephane Nichols-Young.

Night Hunting Approved



It was late in the day when the Commission finally heard the night hunting proposal. Despite overwhelming public opposition, including some from the hunting community, the Commission approved by a 3-1 vote the use of artificial lights to hunt coyotes and cougars (also called mountain lions) in parts of Arizona. Commissioner Norman Freeman was the lone 'No' vote and Commissioner John Harris was absent.

Upon approval of the new rule, the Commission moved up a Saturday agenda item, and immediately implemented the rule in portions of the state. ADLA hopes to have a map up soon to depict those areas. It does have the game management unit ("gmu") numbers where night hunting is permitted, if you have specific questions.

The Commission approved night hunting despite concerns about public safety, and potentially detrimental impact on endangered species and law enforcement. In 2002, the Commission followed Department recommendations to reject a similar proposal. At that time, the Department wrote a thorough memo explaining its position, attaching memos and letters from a number of individual Department biologists who also opposed night hunting.



"English- style" Hunting with Dogs Approved

In voting to approve the rule package, the Commission also voted to allow people to use dogs to hunt and kill animals. There are two organizations in Arizona that use dogs - either packs of beagles or foxhounds - to chase, and in some cases kill, jackrabbits, coyotes and foxes. Although this type of hunting is prohibited in England; it is now legal in Arizona.

Creating Road Blocks to Mexican Gray Wolf Reintroduction

The Commission voted 4-1 to remain as part of the Mexican gray wolf program, but to oppose any new wolf releases until a new management plan, environmental impact statement and 10j Rule are approved. In a moment of confusion, the motion was also stated as 'no new wolf reintroductions until a definitive management plan is in place.' Either way the intent is to block any new wolf releases in the near future.



Dr. Benjamin Tuggle of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service attended the meeting, and was peppered with an alternating lecture and barage of questions by Commissioner Jack Husted. The Commission demonstrated its primary allegiance to protecting ranchers and cattle, rather than its statutory duty to manage willdife and its common law duty to do so minding its public trust for all citizens.

Catalina Bighorn Advisory Group's Op-Ed, May 2014

"Bighorn sheep project needs patience but moves in right direction"

Arizona Daily Star, May 8, 2014. [Online here.](#)

By Randy Serraglio, Mike Quigley and Brian Dolan. Special to the Arizona Daily Star

It has now been more than a month since any reintroduced desert bighorn sheep have died in the Santa Catalina Mountains. Mountain lions have been removed as a result of the Catalina Bighorn Restoration project, and this is unfortunate, but biologists say the overall health of the area's lion population. And wildlife managers have spotted five lambs, all of which appear to be healthy.

This is good news for bighorn and everyone rooting for their recovery in a place they called home for thousands of years, from the 1990s.

The project has been criticized, largely for the lion removals, which are necessary to give the sheep a chance to become established. The project's conservative, targeted lion management plan is designed to keep those removals to a minimum, and it's been built to allow for the reintroduction area to recreational lion hunting with hounds.

Sheep mortality has been high as individuals explore new terrain and learn escape routes, and that's regrettable, but high mortality rates are not unique to the Catalinas. Reintroductions of all sorts of wildlife, including desert bighorn. Many past bighorn reintroductions in Arizona and elsewhere have been successful, but have taken time to achieve success.

Encouragingly, most of the Catalinas sheep are now congregating in prime habitat: the extremely rugged terrain of the Purple Mountain range.

Even using the best available science, wildlife management is a delicate and difficult task. The key is to adapt management to the changing conditions of the environment, including collection and changes in conditions on the ground as projects move forward, in order to give species the best chance for survival.

Some individuals may unavoidably be lost in the process, but the key is to increase the overall population of the species as much as possible, and to do that, it can be found.

By the middle of the 20th century, bighorn sheep numbers had crashed in Arizona and all over the West, largely due to commercial hunting and habitat loss. Since then they've made a dramatic recovery, for two main reasons.

First, states now regulate hunting of bighorn sheep in a rational, science-based fashion, greatly limiting the number of individuals taken. This allows the herd populations to remain stable and secure.

Second, groups that support bighorn conservation put a lot of time, effort and money into reintroduction projects like the one in the Santa Catalinas. About 70 percent of those reintroductions have been successful, and Arizona bighorn numbers have rebounded to nearly 6,000 sheep statewide.

However, just as it's far too soon to call the Catalinas reintroduction a failure, it's also too soon to pop the champagne corks. The Catalina Bighorn Advisory Committee will analyze all the data and experiences of the project's first year and make a science-based recommendation. They may recommend another translocation of sheep. Due to slow reproduction rates, it can take many years for a bighorn herd to reach a population that is self-sustaining.

Challenges remain, and more sheep will be lost, but several factors point toward optimism: The Coronado National Forest has invested hundreds of hours educating recreational users about the importance of staying on trails and not taking dogs into the big

The Coronado is finalizing plans to return fire to its natural role in the Catalinas through its FireScape program, which will benefit many other species. And this summer, workers will break ground on the Oracle Road project, which includes wildlife crossings to connect with other herds. Bighorn are successfully using such crossings in Northern Arizona and other places.

The stark reality of the modern world is that people affect wildlife every day. We believe that intervening to correct our negative influences, and give wildlife the chance to survive and recover is the right thing to do. We agree with Charles Bowden's column in the Arizona Highways: "We can do better than we have. We can bring the bighorns back where they belong."

This column was authored by Randy Serraglio from the Center for Biological Diversity; Mike Quigley of The Wilderness Society; and the Arizona Desert Bighorn Sheep Society.

Bighorns finding their footing (behind paywall, couldn't access)