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Talk of the Town

Column: Delay means extinction for wolves

By DENNIS DUVALL
Special to the Courier

Think of hiking on the Prescott Circle Trail and seeing a wolf. For a hiker this would probably be a thrilling and rewarding outdoors experience. But The Daily Courier considers an opportunity like this "ludicrous" (Editorial: "Reintroducing wolves is an unworkable plan," Dec. 4, 2013).

Local public officials do not want Mexican wolves roaming around Yavapai County either. In an Aug. 1, 2013, letter to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS), the Yavapai County Board of Supervisors opposes expanding the Mexican gray wolf recovery area as a "serious threat" to ranching, hunting and outdoor recreation. The supervisors contend the Mexican wolf has recovered and does not warrant federal protection.

Others believe the Mexican lobo, the world's most endangered wolf, desperately needs our help to regain its rightful place in the natural ecosystem. To make this happen, FWS proposes to restore the wolf to its historic range and to list the Mexican wolf as an essential sub-species of the gray wolf with federal protection under the Endangered Species Act.

In its letter to FWS, the Yavapai Supervisors embrace the special interests of ranchers by citing figures from "Mexican Wolf Recovery," an undated, unscientific and poorly written report by Jess Carey, a self-described "Wolf Interaction Investigator" from New Mexico's Catron County known for its open hostility to wolf reintroduction. From the chapter "How Much Do Family Ranchers Lose [sic] to Mexican Wolves?" the supervisors' letter quotes a total of 651 head of cattle lost to wolf depredation at five ranches in the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area in Catron County. The supervisors tell FWS they do not want to see this "collateral damage to achieve Mexican Wolf Recovery in Yavapai County."

In the Carey report, it is impossible to tell which year or years the cattle loss figure of 651 refers to or how it was arrived at. The figure of 651 does appear to be highly inflated since the Cattle Death Loss from wolf depredation compiled by the USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service

(NASS) is 238 for the entire state of New Mexico in 2011. According to NASS, in 2011 wolf depredation represents 2.4 percent of total cattle deaths compared to 27.6 percent from dog and coyote depredation. In public comment to FWS, Prescott resident and retired judge Ralph Hess also points out the Carey report "fails to analyze the impact of the [wolf] Recovery Program on domestic livestock clearly and accurately. I find the (NASS) analysis to be more comprehensive and reliable."

The Yavapai Supervisors urge FWS to let Arizona Game & Fish "implement effective wolf management procedures" because "We do not wish to have (sportsmen's) activities and our economy put in jeopardy because of the Mexican Wolves' habitat." At the state level, "wildlife management" means guaranteeing a reliable supply of game animals for hunters to "harvest." States view wolves not as game and not as wildlife, but as competitors for the animals preferred by hunters, namely deer and elk. In the Arizona Republic, John Koleszar, vice president of the Arizona Deer Association, complains there are already too few hunting opportunities: "You're telling me you want to put another top-line predator all along the Mogollon Rim?"

Contrary to the supervisors' contention that Mexican wolves "have recovered efficiently [sic]", only 75 lobos have recovered toward a target population of 100 set in 1982. FWS has yet to adopt the 2005 recommendation of the Mexican wolf recovery planning team of 750 wolves as the population goal of successful recovery. This requires the release of more breeding pairs of Mexican wolves into the wild from 300 still at captive breeding sites and establishing at least three core populations able to disperse into suitable habitat throughout their historic range between the Grand Canyon and Mexico.

Time is running out for Mexican gray wolves when delay means extinction. FWS is ignoring the recovery team's best science, while in the wild wolves are threatened by illegal killing, legal killing by ranchers and Wildlife Services, lack of genetic diversity, and capturing and relocating wolves straying outside arbitrary boundaries. Helping to return Mexican wolves to the wildlife community faces fierce opposition from public-land ranchers, hunters and local and state public officials.

Between hysterical lobophobia and special interest politics, seeing a lobo on the trail may be a long time coming.

Dennis DuVall, a Prescott resident, offered public comment at both the Yavapai County Board of Supervisor's meeting on Aug. 1, 2013, and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife hearing in Pinetop on Dec. 3, 2013.

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