

# Catron County declare disaster over wolves

Apr 4, 2025 Jessica Carranza Pino

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The Catron County courthouse exceeded capacity, with approximately 150 attendees crowding the courtroom and hallways during an emergency meeting on Thursday morning.

After listening to 37 public comments for over two hours, the commissioners unanimously approved a resolution declaring a disaster in Catron County, citing the ongoing injuries and damage caused by Mexican Grey Wolves.

State Representative Gail Armstrong offered to hand deliver the emergency declaration to the Governor.

"I'm going to fight like crazy to get her to sign this," Armstrong said. "When our way of life is threatened, we stand up and we say no."

She said she runs cattle in Socorro and Catron County and has spent years attempting to educate her peers and the legislature about ranch life.

"It's not just about the depredations, it's about the breed back, it's about the stress on your cattle, it's about my 13 grandkids playing in the front yard," Armstrong said.

Public commentators were critical of the current wolf management program, highlighting concerns about livestock losses, inaccurate wolf counts, the economic impact, and community safety, especially for elders and children.

Community members shared stories of wolf attacks and kills on their dogs, horses and livestock. A Navajo Apache rancher said despite what Hollywood portrays the wolves are evil in the eyes of her people and take away what the Creator gave them to provide for their families. A rancher who raises livestock guardian dogs said that although the dogs help, it is challenging and expensive. One rancher reported an estimated loss of \$244,000 in five years from wolf depredations.

Ten-year-old Holden McPhaul and 13-year-old Breely Green of Quemado told the commission about their experiences seeing wolves, the impact it's had on their family and their fears of playing outside.

Green cried as she recalled her experience: "I had an encounter with the Mexican wolf. I was all by myself. I was so scared."

She said she didn't have cell phone service to call her dad and although she made it back okay, she is afraid to play on the trampoline because of the wolf tracks near her house.

"I never used to be afraid of wolves, but now I am. I used to be able to ride on a ranch alone, but now my dad says to stay close, my dad never used to pack a gun, but now he does," McPhaul said during his comment.

Catron County Sheriff Keith Hughes said he was committed to community safety.

"I've heard numerous times today about the children I know you people in here are tired of your cattle being killed, tired of your pets being killed," Hughes said, "I'll be damned. I'm going to let a kid be killed. That's not going to happen in my life."

He believes wolves should not be on private land without landowner permission, and he is exploring legal options to charge individuals for bringing wolves onto private property.

Depredation Investigator Shawn Menges shared his firsthand experience investigating wolf depredations throughout the county. He mentioned that on one occasion, he received six calls in a single day, most of which were confirmed wolf kills. He said he has witnessed the heartbreak the situation has caused within the community.

Commissioner Buster Green invited representatives from wildlife organizations, who attended on Zoom, to make comments. They shared ongoing efforts to manage wolf populations through non-lethal methods and refund programs to help ranchers.

Mike Sloan of New Mexico Game and Fish confirmed a reported 162 minimum of wolves in Catron County, which was met with doubt from the crowd.

"We have three full-time staff working on the whole program, doing everything from the hazing animals to traffic, translocating, trying to put collars on animals," Sloan said. "We also have officers in the area who do much of the same work. We do diversionary feeding and coordinate responses with the Fish and Wildlife Service."

Brady McGee, the US Fish and Wildlife Service's Mexican wolf recovery coordinator, supported the county's decision.

"I will say that I think there have been some issues here in regards to some of the compensation with programs and money; I do fully support Catron County trying to get funds and money to be able to hire range riders and do things on their own," McGee said.

The declaration signed by the commissioners on Thursday states the Mexican Grey Wolf Recovery Program (MGWRP) was imposed on the people of Catron County by the Federal Government even though livestock production is a key positive socioeconomic factor and major land use in Catron and is part of the custom, culture and tradition.

The declaration states that the damage has resulted in undue human and animal suffering and hardship and threatens the safety, health, welfare, and well-being of citizens and the economic function of the County of Catron. If not addressed immediately by the County Commission, it will likely result in injury or damage to people or property or substantial financial loss to Catron County.

In the declaration, the Board of County Commissioners requests that the Governor direct the Department of Finance and Administration to make emergency financial resources available to the Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Management.

It also requests that the Governor direct the Adjutant General to order into service any elements of the New Mexico Army National Guard, the New Mexico Air National Guard, and the New Mexico State Defense Force as are or may be needed to provide military support to the civil authorities of Catron County, protect the county's livestock and inhabitants, and avoid wolf conflict.