Sheriff may try to stop wolves' release here

Scott Turner – El Defensor Chieftain Editor – May 5, 2016

Socorro County Sheriff William Armijo will attempt to enforce the wolf-human interaction ordinance if the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service releases wolves in the county.

"I've been put in a bad position," Armijo admits about the possibility of coming in conflict with federal law.

"I'm bound by county ordinance," Armijo said. "If I have to intervene, I will."

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced on its website two weeks ago that it planned an "aggressive" release of a pack of wolves in New Mexico as part of its Mexican Wolf Recovery Program. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service officials said last year that release sites included locations in Socorro County.

Last week, two pups born in captivity in Missouri were released in a den in Catron County, and were accepted into a litter by its mother, the Albuquerque Journal reported.

New Mexico state officials notified the U.S. Wildlife Service shortly after the announcement that the State Department of Game and Fish planned to sue to stop the release. Socorro County Attorney Adren Nance said it is possible the Board of County Commissioners may also pursue a federal injunction.

Nance said he was sure the commissioners support the state's effort to block the release.

They would not be alone. Catron County Commissioner Anita Hand said she also supported the Department of Game and Fish "in their stance that the USFWS needs an updated recovery plan and their decision to not allow any further releases until the recovery plan is updated."

Hand has been among the most vocal leaders in opposition against the release because of reported attacks in her county.

The Albuquerque Journal reported last week that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has reached a tentative settlement with wolf advocacy groups and Western states to develop a plan by 2017, but New Mexico declined to join the settlement. The settlement would have to be approved by U.S. Judge Jennifer Zipps in the District of Arizona.

The service has failed to complete an updated plan since the original plan was adopted in 1982.

Nance said he is unsure if Socorro County will be able to enforce the ordinance because federal law was mixed on the subject.

"I'm pretty sure they can release the wolves on federal land," Nance said. "But we all know wolves don't stay on federal land."

Armijo said his office has not had any calls about wolf attacks since the ordinance went into effect earlier this year. He and Nance were only aware of one wolf sighting, which was near the Rio Grande.

Nance said it was possible local ranchers weren't reporting sightings out of fear federal officials would be watching their land as a result.

He also said Socorro County did not have a reporting system in place yet that was as effective as the one used by Catron County.

Hand said there have been no documented attacks in Catron County in several months, “though there have been many documented and investigated attacks in last several years.”

“Catron County has remained diligent in doing everything we can to prevent such attacks,” Hand said. “We rely on our local law enforcement and Wildlife Investigator to be well informed and to keep the residents informed the best we can. “

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Public Affairs Specialist John Bradley said the Mexican Wolf Interagency Field Team, located in Alpine, Arizona, works daily with livestock producers to implement management measures to reduce conflicts between Mexican wolves and livestock.

“In particular, the IFT hazes wolves away from areas with humans and livestock and provides supplemental feeding until the wolves are able to hunt on their own,” Bradley said. “Also, the Mexican Wolf/Livestock Council directs funding for depredation compensation and payments for presence of wolves to livestock producers to assist with economic costs incurred due to presence of wolves in the area of their livestock operations.”

Bradley did not say how many wolves U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service planned to release, and did not list any locations where the releases would take place.

“We will be assessing conditions for releases over the next few months,” Bradley said.

Bradley said the agency wanted to work with the state and local governments despite opposition.

He cited the comments of Regional Director Benjamin Tuggle in the announcement about the planned release.

“The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service values the partnership we have with the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, and it remains our policy to consult with the States in our joint efforts to recover species,” Tuggle said. “Recovery of the Mexican wolf remains the Service’s goal. We have a statutory responsibility and the authority to recover the Mexican wolf and strive to do so in a collaborative manner with our partners. We aim to bolster the wild Mexican wolf population and improve population genetics through strategic releases of genetically desirable wolves, which will eventually lead to Mexican wolf recovery and state management of the species.”

Bradley said the most recent count of the wolves shows a slight decrease in population.

“We conduct an annual count every year,” Bradley said. “For 2015, there were a minimum of 97 Mexican wolves in the wild, which represents a slight decline from the 2014 population of 110.”

He said the releases were needed to introduce diverse genes into the population. He said inbreeding among the Mexican wolves is threatening their survival.

“Fitness is generally described as an animal’s ability to survive and reproduce,” Bradley said. “Inbreeding can lead to a reduction in fitness, which may be exhibited as smaller litter sizes, higher pup mortality, reduced ability to adapt to a changing environment, etc. On average, the wolves currently in the wild population are considered highly related. If left unmanaged, it should be expected that relatedness among individuals within the population would not improve, resulting in more inbreeding and potential negative effects on the population’s ability to thrive. Releases of wolves from the more genetically diverse captive population can improve all the genetic parameters (gene diversity, relatedness, inbreeding, etc.) to help ensure the long-term conservation of the Mexican wolf.”

Critics of the program – including those in attendance at a Socorro County Board of Commissioners meeting in November — claim the Mexican wolf isn’t a pure species, that the wolf is a mixture of wolf, dog and coyote.

“Those claims are 100 percent false,” Bradley said.