

Wolf protection plan raises hackles in Southwest

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In the small, rural community of Reserve, children waiting for the school bus gather inside wooden and mesh cages provided as protection from wolves. Parents consider the "kid cages" a reasonable precaution.

Defenders of the wolves note there have been no documented wolf attacks in New Mexico or Arizona. Fears of wolves attacking humans, they say, are overblown, and the cages nothing more than a stunt.

In 1995, the reintroduction of Canadian gray wolves into the northern Rockies ignited a furor.

Now that acrimony has cascaded into the Southwest, where the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposes to extend Endangered Species Act protections for an estimated 75 Mexican wolves in the wild in New Mexico and Arizona.

Such protections would make it illegal to kill wolves, in most instances. The new federal plan would also significantly expand the area where the wolves could roam unmolested.

To many conservatives in the West, such protections are examples of government overreach - idealistic efforts by officials who don't know what it's like to live with wolves.

"People have to stand up and defend our rights," said Wink Crigler, a fifth-generation rancher from Arizona who says guests at her tourist

cabins fear they might be attacked by wolves.

Anti-wolf campaigns here - paid for by conservative political organizations antagonistic toward the federal government - often portray the animal as a savage devil preying on children.

The antipathy has encouraged scores of illegal killings of Mexican wolves, whose population dwindled to seven before federal efforts to reintroduce them began in 1998. A young male was fatally shot with an arrow a few weeks ago in the same rural Catron County that uses the kid cages.

Into this atmosphere have come federal officials who by the end of the year are expected to finalize their plan for managing Mexican wolves, a smaller and tawnier subspecies of the Canadian grays.

"With the political debate we see raging, we can't just listen to the loudest voice in the room," said Fish and Wildlife Service Director Dan Ashe. "There are many loud voices in the room. No animal engenders more polarizing emotion among Americans than does the wolf."

He could be describing the situation here: a public policy debate driven not by biology and science but emotional appeals and unalloyed partisanship.

When a previously scheduled Oct. 4 public comment hearing about wolf management was postponed by the government shutdown, advocates came out anyway, staking out nearby meeting rooms at an Albuquerque hotel.

The Save the Lobo rally, paid for by Defenders of Wildlife, featured a man in a wolf costume, children scrawling placards with crayons and people offering videotaped testimony to be forwarded to Washington.

Down the hall, the anti-wolf event was sponsored by Americans for Prosperity, an organization funded by the conservative Koch brothers. The group offered literature by Ayn Rand and screened the documentary "Wolves in Government Clothing," which equated rampaging wolves with an out-of-control federal government. Said one Arizona rancher at the event: "Is this politically driven? Absolutely."

An armed guard patrolled, made necessary, Americans for Prosperity said, by death threats from environmental groups.

The issue of public safety loomed large, with much discussion of the kid cages, boxy structures that resemble chicken coops. Photos and video of the cages have been circulated by Americans for Prosperity, although it was unclear how many exist or who requested or paid for them. Local media reports suggest at least some of them were built by students in a high school shop class.

Calls to the superintendent of schools in Reserve were not returned.

To Carolyn Nelson, a teacher in Catron County, the cages don't go far enough to protect children. She said that seven years ago her son, then 14, was out walking and came across three wolves. Frightened, he backed against a tree. One wolf stared him down while the other two circled.

Only when the boy cocked the gun he was carrying did the wolves run off.

"I think it was a miracle he wasn't killed," she said.

Crigler, the Arizona rancher, who also attended the event, said she understands the fears of the guests in her tourist cabins. "I can't tell them that they are perfectly safe. There is some degree of risk," she said. "My

concern is that I see wolves habituated to people. They are meat eaters. Savages."

According to wolf researcher Carlos Carroll, who was among the scientists studying Mexican wolves for the Fish and Wildlife Service, the probability of wolves targeting humans is low.

"All we can go on is what has happened in the past," said Carroll, a conservation biologist with the Klamath Center for Conservation Research in Northern California. "There have been maybe two to three attacks in the last decade, in Canada and Alaska, where there are thousands of wolves."

Wolf advocate Michael Robinson with the nonprofit Center for Biological Diversity said he respected people's fears but added, "The risk has been greatly exaggerated for cynical reasons."

Likewise, the incidence of wolves killing cattle and sheep is actually much less common than widely believed. According to the National Agricultural Statistics Service, about a third of sheep deaths nationwide are attributable to predators, with wolves accountable for only 0.4 percent of those attacks. The data indicate that domestic dogs are responsible for nearly 20 times more sheep kills than wolves.

Similar numbers hold true for cattle, where wolf kills rank behind coyotes, domestic dogs, cougars and vultures, which have attacked calves.

Ranchers are compensated when they can prove livestock have been killed by wolves. Crigler lost three calves last year and was reimbursed by a government program, but she said the payment was below fair market value.

"It's already hard enough to make a living," she said, adding that a neighboring cattleman was getting ready to walk away from the business because of wolves.

It's undeniable that small ranchers and farmers face economic troubles - and it's common for some people to feel powerless living in states where the federal government is the landlord of more than half the landscape.

But some anti-wolf advocates in Albuquerque hold wolves responsible for such diverging issues as the depopulation of small towns to the closing of country schools.

"They attach a lot of rancor to wolf recovery that isn't about wolves," said John Horning, executive director of WildEarth Guardians, based in Santa Fe, N.M. "It's a symbol. It's about the loss of political capital, the economic decline of rural life. Wolves are a surrogate for all the changes that are happening that are very frightening."

David Spady, the California director of Americans for Prosperity and producer of the anti-wolf documentary, readily agreed that [wolves](#) are a launching pad to air an array of grievances, from taxes to state's rights.

"The whole debate over the wolf is part of other battles over the Endangered Species Act and failed government programs," said Spady, who wore silver wolf-head cuff links.

"The [wolf](#) is symbolic of a larger fact: The [federal government](#) is running roughshod over private property rights," he said. "We at the local level believe that we understand the needs of our place rather than somebody in Washington, D.C."

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