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ADVOCATES FOR WOLVES PACK PHOENIX HEARING; REINTRODUCTION IDEA GETS AIRED FOR LAST TIME

By Steve Yozwiak, Staff writer

Concerned cowboys and busloads of howling environmentalists showed up Thursday in Phoenix for the final public hearing on the reintroduction of the Mexican gray wolf to the wilds of Arizona and New Mexico.

The hearing by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service was conducted partly at the request of ranchers who fear the loss of their cattle. But it was pro-wolf folks who dominated the audience, including some ranchers who support the return of the predator.

"We're trying to atone for our bad karma," said Will Holder, a fourth-generation rancher from eastern Arizona, adding that his grandfather, Cleve, killed the last timber wolf in Arizona many years ago.

"We don't manage cattle anymore. We manage the environment, and the cattle take care of themselves," said Holder, who runs up to 300 head of cattle on 10,000 acres of U.S. Forest Service land along Eagle Creek, where the wolves would be located.

Holder said wolves would help control flourishing elk populations, which compete with cattle for forage.

But Holder is an exception.

Most ranchers are concerned that reintroducing the wolf would lead to lost cattle and the closing of some public lands.

Jerald Barney, a farmer from Safford, said that even though environmental groups have promised to compensate ranchers for cattle killed by wolves, which has been done in other states, he fears the money will run out.

"There's no guarantee," he said.

George Lemen of Pima, president of Save Our Sheep, is worried that the wolves could wipe out Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep. The state and private groups have reintroduced the sheep in recent years to the same Blue Range Wilderness Area where the wolves would be reintroduced. Lemen said he'd rather see more hunting licenses issued to eliminate overpopulation of elk and deer.

Doc Lane of the Arizona Cattlemen's Association said the project is a waste of taxpayers' money because the wolves being bred in captivity now don't have a large enough genetic base to survive.

"I don't see the advantage of doing that just so we can hear the wolves howl," Lane said.

Environmentalists turned out by the hundreds for Thursday's meeting, which they saw as emblematic of the fight to preserve the Endangered Species Act. Lane said more ranchers would have attended if they weren't so busy with roundups this time of year.

The meeting, the last of many held by the Fish and Wildlife Service since 1992, was a dry run for a hearing Saturday by the Arizona Game and Fish Commission. The commission will consider whether the state should move ahead with studies about the wolf reintroduction.

"This is a key moment . . . as to whether wolf reintroduction plans will continue in Arizona," said Rob Smith of the Sierra Club.

If the wolves are not allowed back into the wild, from which they were eliminated by hunters by 1980, they will be found only in zoos, Smith said.

"The places wolves like are the places we like, which are wild places," Smith said.

"The wolf basically symbolizes the wilderness in the Southwest. If the wolves can't live here, then you don't really have a wilderness."

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