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GAME AND FISH SEEKS INPUT ON WOLF PLAN

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Things you may wish to know:

The Arizona Game and Fish Department last week released its draft plan for reintroducing the endangered Mexican gray wolf to this state.

The plan calls for releasing two pairs of wolves a year for three years into the 2,000 square miles of the Blue Primitive Area in eastern Arizona. the ultimate goal would be to sustain four to nine packs of wolves for perhaps a total of 45 to 50 animals.

Public meetings for input on the plan will be held Monday in Flagstaff, Tuesday in Pinetop-Lakeside, Wednesday in Springerville, Friday in Blue, Saturday in Clifton, Oct. 12 in Alpine and Oct. 13 in Phoenix. Public input will be included in the final plan that will be submitted to the state Game and Fish Commission at its October meeting in Phoenix.

The plan doesn't mean wolves will be reintroduced here. Acceptance of the plan by commissioners only means that Arizona wishes to be counted when the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which is in charge of endangered species, develops an environmental impact statement for reintroduction.

The environmental impact statement will include a number of alternatives, including no reintroduction, a "non-essential experimental" reintroduction (which means animals could be moved or destroyed if they become troublesome to humans or livestock) and a reintroduction that would give the animals full protection (don't touch) of the Endangered Species Act.

But if reintroduction is approved by the federal agency, Arizona should be involved by furnishing the plan.

At its last public meeting in Flagstaff, Game and Fish commissioners heard from Arlene Hanson of Wyoming, head of the No Wolf Option Committee that is fighting reintroduction in Wyoming and Idaho.

Her group is financially backed by the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep, ranchers and smaller groups. The sheep conservation organization fears damage the wolf might do to bighorn populations in those states. Running as a pack, wolves are the most fearsome predators in North America, biologists

say.

She said a major concern is that the federal government offers "no valid compensation fund" in the West to reimburse ranchers for the loss of wildlife. Defenders of Wildlife does offer such a fund, but Hanson said it is not a guaranteed, long-range fund. Defenders of Wildlife disputes her claim.

She said ranchers in Minnesota have been offered \$400 in federal reimbursements for each animal lost to wolves, but that some of the livestock is worth \$1,000 a head.

She said that by adding wolves to other predators already inhabiting the two states, the cumulative effect of predators on grazing wildlife such as bighorns, moose and the like could be a kill of 90 percent of the calf crop.

Some biologists say even in the worst cases the take wouldn't be that high.

If commissioners approve the reintroduction plan in October, it would be submitted to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for inclusion on the draft environmental impact statement. The environmental impact statement itself could be ready by May, and a decision could come by next fall.

Biologists say their greatest fears of lawsuits are not from anti-wolf groups. They dread suits from pro-animal groups that would call for full protection of introduced wolves, giving no leeway for management of problem animals.

Terry Johnson, head of non-game wildlife management for state Game and Fish, said the department would oppose reintroduction on that basis.

Those wishing to receive information on the reintroduction plan have two choices. There is a three-page executive summary and the full 120-page reintroduction plan. Either can be had for no charge by calling 789-3499.

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