

THE MESQUITE GRILL

NEWS FROM THE SOUTHWEST ENVIRONMENTAL CENTER · WINTER 2013 · WILDMESQUITE.ORG



Back by Noon Outings Wrap Up for 2013

SWEC wrapped up its Fall 2013 Back by Noon Outings Series with a trip to an unnamed slot canyon north of Las Cruces (pictured above) led by conservation advocate David Soules. Look for the Spring 2014 schedule on www.wildmesquite.org, or better yet, sign up for SWEC's email newsletter at www.wildmesquite.org.

Double your gift!

Thanks to a very generous donor, all contributions to the Southwest Environmental Center made before December 31, 2013 will be matched 2-to-1, up to \$10,000.

This is a great way to make your support for our work on behalf of wildlife and wild places go further.

To make a tax-deductible gift, go to www.wildmesquite.org and click "Join and Donate." Or use the handy form on page 7. Thank you!

Feds propose changes to Mexican wolf program

One step forward, three steps back for lobo recovery

Seemingly determined to get out of the wolf conservation business as quickly as possible, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) is proposing changes to the Mexican wolf reintroduction program that wolf advocates say would slow the recovery of lobos in the Southwest.

There are only about 75 Mexican wolves in the wild, making it one of the most endangered animals on the planet. Biologists say a population this small is living dangerously close to extinction.

Scientists appointed by FWS to serve on the now defunct Mexican wolf recovery team recommend that many more lobos—at least 750 distributed in three genetically connected populations—are needed to ensure the longterm survival of the subspecies.

Yet the proposed changes would work against recovery by preventing wolves from establishing territories in the best available wolf habitats, such as the Grand Canyon and southern Rockies, and keeping them genetically isolated from wolves to the north and Mexico.

FWS is proposing one good change: to allow direct releases of Mexican wolves from the captive population to occur throughout the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area—something that biologists have said is needed for more than a decade. The new rule would allow direct releases anywhere in the Gila and Apache National Forests of New Mexico and Arizona, as well as some additional areas. SWEC supports this long overdue change.

FWS is also proposing to expand the area in



which wolves are allowed to establish territories. Wolves would be allowed to occupy suitable habitats anywhere between I-10 and I-40 in Arizona and New Mexico—an area called the Mexican Wolf Experimental Population Area (MWEPA). If they left this area, they would be captured and retrieved.

On the face of it, this seems like a good thing but in reality it is a poison pill to recovery because it would institutionalize genetic isolation. It would prevent Mexican wolves from dispersing north to interact with established wolf packs in the northern Rockies, and it is

(continued on page 3)



Wolf Advocates Speak Out

Mexican wolf supporters showed up in force at an Albuquerque public hearing to express their disapproval of proposed changes to the recovery program. SWEC was well represented. Read more on page 6.

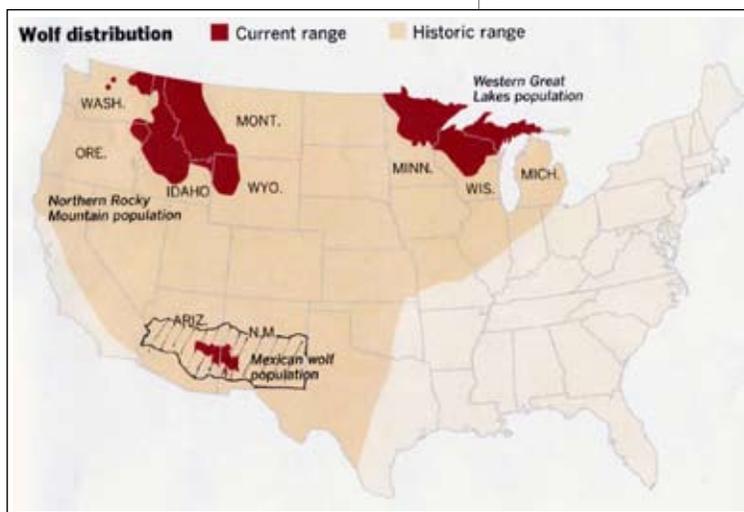
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dinner for eight**
See back page for details.

Feds getting out of wolf conservation business

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) is proposing to remove federal protections for all gray wolves in the U.S. (except Mexican wolves) and turn management over to the states.

FWS says that wolf numbers have rebounded enough to the point that the species can be taken off the endangered species list. It says that minimum population goals needed to keep wolves from going extinct have been met and the species is therefore "recovered."

Conservationists argue that it is premature to delist wolves. Gray wolves today occupy only a fraction of their historic range (see map). The approximately 5000 wolves currently in the lower 48 states are a far cry from the estimated 380,000 wolves that once roamed the West and Mexico.



Base Map LA Times. Under FWS' proposal, Mexican wolves would be confined to the striped area, preventing them from establishing additional core populations in the Grand Canyon region and southern Rockies, and isolating them genetically from wolves elsewhere.

Granted, much historic wolf habitat has been lost, but extensive areas of unoccupied suitable wolf habitat still remain in the Pacific Northwest, California, Colorado, Utah, and the Grand Canyon region.

Wolf advocates say that FWS's interpretation of "recovery" under the Endangered Species Act is too narrow. The goal should be to restore wolves to "ecologically effective" numbers widely distributed across the landscape so they can regulate prey populations and shape ecosystems.

In a May 21 letter to Interior Secretary Sally Jewell, 16 leading wolf biologists wrote that the FWS proposal to delist did not reflect "the

conclusions of our work or the best available science concerning the recovery of wolves."

Turning management over to the states virtually guarantees that wolves will not recolonize unoccupied former habitats. Where wolves have been delisted in the northern Rockies and upper Great Lakes, states have responded by implementing liberal hunting and trapping programs aimed at reducing wolf numbers and discouraging expansion beyond where they currently exist.

As of mid-2013, more than 1700 wolves had been reported killed by hunters and trappers in Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Minnesota, and Wisconsin since delisting began in 2011. Wolf numbers in those states have dropped by 13 percent from peak levels before delisting.

In 85 percent of Wyoming, wolves are classified as "predatory animals." No license is required, and there are no bag limits or seasons.

In 2012, hunters and trappers killed 570 wolves in Idaho, Montana and Wyoming—one third of the estimated wolf population in those states at the beginning of the year. If you include wolves

killed by government agents for livestock depredations, shot illegally or hit by vehicles, a staggering 850 wolves (minimum) died at the hands of humans—almost half of the wolf population at the beginning of the year.

Other states are anticipating delisting by approving wolf hunts, even those that don't have established wolf populations, such as Utah and South Dakota which has reclassified its non-existent wolves as "varmints."

Clearly full recovery for wolves cannot occur without federal protection.

Proposed changes to wolf program

continued from front page

unlikely that wolves coming south would be able to disperse in sufficient numbers through wolf-hostile states like Utah and Wyoming, especially if FWS' other proposal—to remove federal protections for all gray wolves in the U.S. other than lobos—is adopted (see article this page).

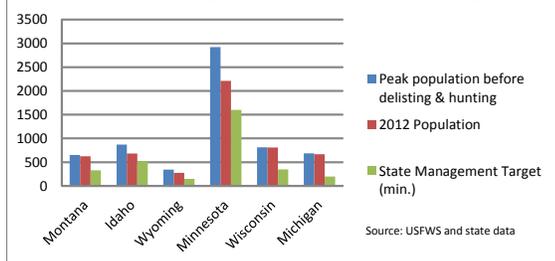
The proposal would also prevent wolves from establishing two additional core populations needed for longterm survival because the places where enough habitat exists to support these populations—the Grand Canyon and the southern Rockies of New Mexico and Colorado—lie outside the MWEPA boundaries.

FWS is also proposing to continue the current designation of wild Mexican wolves as an "experimental, nonessential" population. These terms have legal meaning under the Endangered Species Act. The experimental part is arguable—most reintroductions are done under this designation—but 15 years after the first wolf was released into the wild, one could make the case that the experiment is over.

The "nonessential" is the real problem, leaving Mexican wolves much less protected than they would be otherwise. To say that the only population of wild lobos in the world is not "essential" to the continued survival of the subspecies in the wild defies logic as well as the best available science.

The agency is accepting public comments on its proposal until December 17th.

Gray wolf numbers in the Northern Rockies and Great Lakes Region: before and after delisting



In places where the gray wolf has already been delisted, states have implemented aggressive hunting and trapping programs to reduce wolf numbers to management targets. Wolf numbers have dropped 13 percent since their peak prior to delisting, and continue to fall.

Speak up for wolves!

FWS is accepting comments on its proposed changes to the Mexican wolf reintroduction program until December 17. Please take a moment to express your opinion.

Here's what Mexican wolves need now to recover:

1. Release more wolves into the wild. FWS should expedite a rule change allowing for direct releases anywhere in the Blue Range Recovery Area, and scrap the rest of its proposal until it completes an up-to-date recovery plan.

2. A science-based recovery plan containing goals and criteria for determining when Mexican wolves are truly recovered, using the best available science as the law requires. The current Mexican wolf recovery plan, hammered out on a typewriter (remember those?) in 1982, is woefully outdated. Not only was it done before the discipline of conservation biology existed, it lacks an objective, science-based definition of Mexican wolf recovery.

By the way, the goal of establishing 100 Mexican wolves in the wild by 2006? That was only intended to be an urgent, first step towards recovery, not the end game, yet FWS and wolf opponents continue to cling to it as if it is synonymous with recovery.

3. Eliminate boundaries. If FWS insists on going forward with its proposed changes, it should drop the requirement that wolves straying outside the MWEPA be captured and retrieved. Wolves know where the best habitat is--let them find it!

You can submit comments directly from our website at www.wildmesquite.org/node/501, or mail them to:

Public Comments Processing
Attn: FWS-R2-ES-2013-0056
Div. of Policy & Directives Management
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
4401 N. Fairfax Dr., MS 2042-PDM
Arlington, VA 22203

Thank you!

SWEC urges BLM to do more to protect wildlife and wild places in plan for southern NM

The Southwest Environmental Center has joined other conservation, hunting, and outdoor recreation groups in calling on the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to beef up protections for wildlife and wild places in a proposed 20-year management plan for 2.82 million acres of federal public lands in Dona Ana, Otero and Sierra Counties.

SWEC and the coalition submitted their comments in response to BLM's Tri-County Draft Resource Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement.

The groups believe that management actions proposed by BLM in the plan are not up to the task of protecting the area's important resources against threats such as off-road vehicle use, oil and gas drilling, and climate change.

In addition, they say that the BLM's plan is handicapped by a lack of basic information about important resources under its control needed to make sound long-term management decisions.



Otero Mesa would still be subject to oil and gas development, mining and other threats under BLM's proposed plan.

The groups pointed to Otero Mesa as an example of where the BLM's plan falls short. In 2008, conservationists urged BLM to establish a 583,837 acre Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) to protect the unique wildlife, grasslands and wilderness of the greater Otero Mesa ecosystem. To protect those values, they recommended that the entire area be put off-limits to incompatible activities such as off-road vehicles, oil and gas development and mining. Instead, BLM proposed to set aside less than 200,000 acres as a new ACEC, with few new protections.



BLM's proposed plan would reduce the extent of large blocks of connected habitat needed by pronghorn and other species to adapt to climate change.

SWEC is urging BLM to do a better job of addressing climate change in the plan. For example, biologists frequently recommend that large blocks of connected habitat be maintained to allow for wildlife species to shift in response to changing conditions. However, BLM's proposal would actually reduce the extent of these areas from the status quo by 11 percent.

The groups also criticize BLM's handling of lands with wilderness characteristics in the plan. These areas are particularly important as wildlife habitat and for the opportunities they provide for outdoor recreation.

Conservationists identified more than 365,000 such acres in the three counties and provided that information to BLM. In its Tri-County plan, however, BLM claimed to find only 11,500 acres of land with wilderness characteristics in the entire planning area, and recommended that less than 1000 acres be managed to protect those qualities.

Similarly, the groups criticized BLM's decision not to deal with oil and gas leasing in the plan. BLM has said it intends to defer oil and gas decisions until after the Tri-County plan is completed. But the groups say BLM is putting the horse before the cart, because decisions about if, where and how to allow oil and gas leasing to occur will affect virtually every other resource and use on public lands.

SWEC will continue to stay involved and work to improve the Tri-County plan as it moves forward.

To read the complete comments, go to www.wildmesquite.org.

A Wild Night...For Wildlife

Scenes from the Southwest Environmental Center's annual gala--October 5, 2013



More than 250 people came out to enjoy an evening of great food, music and dancing under the stars on Main Street in downtown Las Cruces. Nearly \$20,000 was raised to support SWEC's conservation programs.

We are very grateful to this year's event sponsors:

- Vescovo Toyota of Las Cruces
- Positive Energy Solar
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- Williams Design Group
- Bank '34
- Sleep Lab of Las Cruces
- Lisa Willman CPA
- Energy Concepts
- East Lohman Veterinary Clinic
- Milagro's Coffee y Espresso
- Jornada Veterinary Clinic



Raft the Rio 2013

June 15, 2013

On a beautiful Saturday in June, only a few weeks after the river was bone dry, more than 300 intrepid sailors launched a gaggle of 86 boats down the Rio Grande for a day of fun on the water.

Many thanks to this year's sponsors:

- Positive Energy Solar
- Vescovo Toyota of Las Cruces
- Andele Restaurante
- Olive Garden Restaurant
- The Hot Rod Shop
- Southwest Expeditions
- United Rentals
- NMSU Outdoor Recreation



SWEC proposes Rio Grande restoration project in Sunland Park

The Rio Grande in southern New Mexico and west Texas has endured many ecological insults, but none worse than the loss of year-round, slow-water aquatic habitat needed by native fish for spawning and to survive low flows in the river.

The Southwest Environmental Center's river restoration projects such as the Picacho Wetlands and La Mancha Wetland are intended to address this critical ecological need.

SWEC is investigating the feasibility of undertaking an aquatic habitat restoration project at the confluence of the Rio Grande and an irrigation drain in Sunland Park (NM).

Although the site is located in a blighted urban area and is not much to look at, it offers something unique and valuable--a year-round supply of water. The project would take advantage of perennial flows in both the Montoya Drain and the river, thanks to discharges from an El Paso Electric power plant into the drain, and from the Santa Teresa and Sunland Park wastewater treatment plants to the river.

Together these sources create a rarity in this region: a three-mile section of the Rio Grande that flows year-round. Most of the river in southern New Mexico and west Texas runs dry when irrigation releases from upstream reservoirs are turned off during the non-irrigation



The confluence of the Montoya Drain with the Rio Grande in Sunland Park offers something extremely valuable for river restoration work: a year-round source of water.

season.

By restoring aquatic habitat at this site, it might be possible to provide a refuge for fish and other aquatic species during the non-irrigation season. If enough of these projects can be cobbled together, it may be possible to reestablish viable populations of native fish, such as longnose gar and speckled chub, that can survive from year to year.

The project could also help to reduce bacterial contamination to the river, as well as improve the functionality of the Montoya drain.

We are exploring the project idea with the International Boundary and Water Commission and other potential partners.



SWEC takes Lobo Limo to Albuquerque

Wolf supporters from southern New Mexico and El Paso were well represented at a public hearing in Albuquerque on November 20 on proposed changes to the Mexican wolf recovery program.

A group of ten of them traveled together to the mid-week, evening meeting in style on SWEC's van, dubbed the Lobo Limo.

La Mancha Wetland Project stalled

How long does it take to process a water rights application? A long time apparently, if you are the understaffed, overworked New Mexico Office of State Engineer (OSE).

The Southwest Environmental Center has been forced to put our La Mancha Wetland Project on hold while we wait for OSE to process an application submitted by the City of Las Cruces to transfer groundwater rights to the project.

OSE says those rights are needed to offset water lost through evaporation once the project is completed.

The City's paperwork was submitted on May 17, 2011--more than two and a half years ago!

Hopefully we'll get the green light in time to complete the project before the 2014 irrigation season begins.

Groups to NM Game Commission: do the right thing

A coalition led by SWEC of nine conservation organizations with thousands of members in New Mexico is calling upon the New Mexico Game Commission to conduct a nationwide search for candidates to fill the recently vacated position of director of the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish (NMDGF).

In a letter dated November 18, the groups urged the Commission to search for candidates with the professional qualifications and experience needed to address multiple challenges facing wildlife management in the state.

"The director position is important to all New Mexicans who care about our wildlife heritage," said Kevin Bixby, Executive Director of the Southwest Environmental Center. "New Mexico ranks near the top of all the states in the number of wildlife species found within its borders. As head of the agency responsible for managing the state's wildlife, the director plays a key role in protecting New Mexico's biodiversity."

Citing a growing tension between the views held by non-hunters and the values reflected in current state law and policy, as evidenced by recent public controversies over bear and cougar harvest quotas, fur trapping, Mexican wolf management and coyote killing contests, the groups urged the Commission to hire someone with the ability to reach out to all stakeholders and lead NMDGF in the management of the state's wildlife for the benefit of all New Mexicans.

The groups highlighted the economic importance of wildlife to New Mexico. According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, wildlife-related recreation brings in nearly a billion dollars annually to the state, including \$328 million related to wildlife watching.

Besides SWEC, the groups included: Sierra Club: Rio Grande Chapter, Animal Protection of New Mexico, Back Country Horsemen of New Mexico, WildEarth Guardians, Sandia Mountain BearWatch, Conservation Voters New Mexico, New Mexico Wilderness Alliance, and the Center for Biological Diversity.

What price immigration reform?

The immigration bill approved by the Senate passed by a wide margin, but only after it was larded up with costly and unnecessary "security" measures that will lead to an unprecedented militarization of the border and spell disaster for wildlife, wilderness and the border environment for generations.

The bill's \$46 billion security package includes:

- \$7.5 billion to double the miles of pedestrian fencing (think "iron curtain") along the U.S.-Mexico border, from 350 to 700—a distance equal to the length of the entire Mexican border with California, Arizona and New Mexico combined.

- \$30 billion over the next 10 years to put more than 38,000 border patrol agents on the U.S.-Mexico border, more than double

the agency's entire current force, which itself has doubled over the past eight years. That's one agent every 90 yards, if evenly spaced along the 1954-mile long border. Meanwhile, arrests of illegal border crossers are at a 40-year low.

- \$4.5 billion to purchase new technology, including drones, radar systems and Black

Hawk helicopters.

The bill elevates law enforcement above all other considerations. It expands the authority given to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) under the REAL ID Act of 2005 to waive federal, state and local laws for the "expeditious" construction of roads, fences and other border infrastructure.

The environment will pay a heavy price. The U.S.-Mexico border is home to a surprising diversity of wildlife and many important natural areas. Survival in this parched land depends on access to water and resources on

both sides of the border. Climate change puts an even greater premium on wildlife being able to adjust their movements in search of shifting habitats.

The legislation requires that the Border Patrol be grant-

ed immediate access for "routine motorized patrols" to all federal public lands in Arizona within 100 miles of Mexico, including designated wilderness—some of the most important areas for wildlife precisely because motorized use is prohibited. Although limited to Arizona, it is a safe bet House Republicans will try to expand this requirement to cover the entire

border.

Border Patrol vehicles have already cut thousands of miles of unauthorized roads on public lands, including nearly 8,000 miles in Arizona's Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge, harming wildlife, destroying vegetation and eroding soils. Yes, illegal border crossers cause problems too, but the localized impacts of trash, human waste and (mostly) foot traffic are minimal compared to the damage done by multitudes of agents in off-road vehicles.

Ask any biologist about the best way to drive a species to extinction, and the response will be: slice up its habitat, block movement corridors and isolate populations. That is exactly what building more pedestrian fencing will do. It may not push any particular species over the edge, but it will certainly make the likelihood of extinction greater for a lot of species. Impenetrable to any creature bigger than a lizard, the fence has and will continue to harm a wide array of species, including endangered jaguars, Sonoran pronghorn and Mexican wolves.

The security measures in the Senate bill will be an unmitigated disaster for the environment for years to come—literally, since Republicans rejected an amendment to include modest mitigation requirements to compensate for the worst impacts.

It's not like these measures were requested by those on the frontlines. DHS Secretary Napolitano told a Senate committee that her agency did not need additional fencing. Senate Democrats accepted them in an effort to muster at least 70 votes, which, it was assumed, would register so high on the bipartisanship meter that the House would have no choice but to follow suit and pass a similar bill.

Conservationists support a balanced approach to immigration reform, including measures to address genuine security issues in ways that don't harm the border's wildlife and environment, waste billions of taxpayers dollar or circumvent our nation's laws. On this count, the Senate bill is absolutely the wrong way forward.

Our Mission

Established in 1991, the Southwest Environmental Center works to protect and restore native wildlife and their habitats in the Southwestern borderlands. Not a member? Please join us today!



The immigration bill passed by the Senate earlier this year requires that the miles of wildlife-unfriendly pedestrian fencing along the U.S.-Mexico border be doubled.

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THANK YOU!
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Follow Apollo L. Lobo on Facebook

With a little help from SWEC, a real lobo now has his own Facebook page.

Apollo is the alpha male of the Willow Springs pack in New Mexico's Gila National Forest. He was born in the wild five years ago.

After leaving his parents and traveling widely on his own, he found his mate (Athena). Together they formed their own pack--the Willow Springs pack--in 2012. They had at least one pup this year, maybe more.



Apollo is a five year old Mexican wolf, the alpha male of the Willow Springs Pack. He is "in a relationship."

As far as we know, Apollo is the only wild animal with a Facebook page. Mark Zuckerberg might not approve, but we thought giving him his own Facebook page would be an interesting way to disseminate information about Mexican wolves to a wider audience. You can follow his adventures and learn more about the lives of lobos by "friending" him on Facebook.



Win a gourmet dinner for eight

Attention all you foodies!

The Southwest Environmental Center is raffling off a fabulous four-course dinner for eight prepared by a group of skilled Las Cruces chefs who call themselves the Rio Kitchen Kut-Ups.

You'll enjoy four fabulous courses paired with different wines. Choose from a meat or vegetarian entree. Tickets are \$10 and the drawing will be held on January 14. The dinner will be held on a date to be mutually agreed upon by the winner and chefs, at your place (in Las Cruces area) or theirs.

Proceeds will go to support our conservation programs. You can buy tickets online at www.wildmesquite.org, or come into the office Monday through Friday, 9 am to 6 pm.

For more information, call (575) 522-5552.

Rank of New Mexico among U.S. states in number of species:

- Birds--2
- Reptiles-3
- Mammals--3
- Plants--4
- Overall Diversity--4

Source: NatureServe, 2002. *States of the Union: Ranking America's Biodiversity.*

Don't miss out

Do we have your email address? The best way to stay informed about SWEC events and issues is to sign up for our weekly eNewsletter. You can do it at wildmesquite.org or call us at (575) 522-5552.

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