

Explanation of Wolf Resolution Considered by Parks and Wildlife Commission



Jan. 8, 2016

More than ten years ago, the Parks and Wildlife Commission (PWC) approved a plan entitled, *Findings and Recommendations for Managing Wolves that Migrate into Colorado*. The plan, a collaborative result of the Colorado Wolf Management Working Group, was in response to the reintroduction of gray wolves by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) into their historic habitat, the northern Rocky Mountains.

In November, the PWC returned to the discussion of wolves and the active introduction or reintroduction of wolves into Colorado. Interest in wolves remains high in Colorado and the proposed resolution has generated considerable public discussion and concern.

Many are asking, “Why is this resolution in front of the Commission now? Isn’t this an ‘anti-wolf’ resolution? How can the Commission, the steward and champion of wildlife for the state, oppose the introduction of wolves, yet remain true to the Findings, which recommended that wolves naturally colonizing the state be ‘allowed to live with no boundaries where they find habitat’? Can a resolution in opposition to wolf introduction remain supportive of wolf recovery?”

These questions are reconciled by a closer look at the resolution itself and the issues surrounding federal wolf recovery programs across the western United States. In considering these questions, it is important to note that the resolution does not pass judgment on the value of wolves as future members of the state’s fauna. Rather, it addresses the question of which wolves should eventually live in Colorado, and how they will get to the state.

Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) takes a proactive approach by presenting this resolution to the Commission well in advance of anticipated federal rulings with facts based upon ecological principles.

These facts include:

1. Wolves remain federally listed as an endangered species in Colorado and throughout much of the West. The proposed resolution encourages the federal government to focus Mexican wolf recovery efforts within the subspecies’ historical range, which largely encompasses Mexico, but extends northward into the United States to include southern Arizona and New Mexico. Wolves are capable of traveling long distances, and although solitary Mexican wolves may occasionally have explored the state, there is no evidence that populations of the subspecies ever occurred in Colorado.
2. Presently, both the gray wolf and the Mexican wolf (listed separately as a subspecies) of the southwestern United States are classified as federally endangered in Colorado, and managed by the USFWS. USFWS, not CPW, is responsible for any wolves that travel into Colorado.
3. CPW takes its role in conserving the state’s diverse wildlife resources seriously. Planning for management of wolves within Colorado began soon after the USFWS reintroduced wolves into the northern Rocky Mountains. In 2004, the (then) Colorado Division of Wildlife assembled representatives of a variety of interests (livestock producers, environmentalists, sportsmen, local government and wildlife biologists) to form a public Colorado Wolf Management Working Group. The Findings, (sometimes referred to as ‘Colorado’s wolf plan,’) represents broad-based agreement on how wolves migrating into Colorado will be managed once the species is removed from federal

protection under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and the state assumes management authority.

4. The State's Legislature retains sole authority to approve Colorado's involvement in any introduction or reintroduction of any ESA-listed species into the state, including wolves. Neither the PWC, nor CPW employees can participate in a release of wolves without the express approval of the General Assembly. It is also important to note, because of this fact, the working group report did not support the prospect of active introduction/reintroduction of wolves into Colorado.

Why now? Why is a resolution that opposes introduction/reintroduction of wolves under consideration by the Commission?

The USFWS is evaluating the science regarding the recovery of Mexican wolves within the confines of the United States, including introductions of the subspecies to the north, outside of its historic range and within the borders of the states of Colorado and Utah. CPW believes that a concerted effort to recover Mexican wolves within its' historic range, in full partnership with Mexico, should occur before consideration is given to establishing this subspecies outside of its historic distribution. Such an effort will require a commitment by federal and state agencies in both the United States and Mexico.

This past fall, the USFWS renewed its effort to update the recovery plan for Mexican wolves; the federal timeline calls for a draft plan for public review by late 2016, and the final recovery plan is scheduled for completion in December 2017. The Mexican wolf was extirpated in the wild by 1977, and recovery has struggled since the first captive-bred animals were released in the Blue Range that straddles the Arizona-New Mexico border. Currently, about 110 wolves exist in those states, and a handful of wolves are known in northern Mexico. Although both the United States and Mexico are cooperatively managing a captive breeding program for Mexican wolves, there has been very limited collaborative effort focused on establishing a true binational recovery program for Mexican wolves across their historic range, most of which lies within Mexico.

Is the state of Colorado opposed to wolves? No; neither the PWC, nor CPW staff have expressed opposition to the Colorado Wolf Management Working Group's recommendations, which clearly demonstrate acceptance of wolves in Colorado, with conditions. The Findings urge that wolves that migrate into Colorado be allowed to live "with no boundaries" where they find habitat. It also recommends that wolves be managed where possible to avoid conflicts with other land uses, including livestock and big game populations, but that problems should be resolved using both non-lethal and lethal methods when needed. CPW firmly supports these recommendations.

The resolution opposing introduction/reintroduction of wolves has been attacked as ignoring the best available science on wolves. Actually, the resolution embraces the best available science.

The Mexican wolf subspecies (*Canis lupis baileyi*) is a product of isolation from wolf populations to the north. Limited genetic exchange over time resulted in a smaller wolf that lived in woodlands of Mexico and the southwestern states, preying primarily on deer. Attempts to establish Mexican wolf populations north of historic range will be counterproductive to the objective of recovering this subspecies, by artificially creating populations of Mexican wolves far north and in close proximity to the robust populations of gray wolves (currently in west/central Wyoming). Given the long-range movements of wolves, interchange between Mexican and gray wolves would be expected, resulting in a dilution and perhaps loss of the unique set of genes carried by the Mexican wolf. Under this scenario, wolves would exist in Colorado, but it is highly unlikely that they would remain as Mexican wolves very long as the larger gray wolves interbreed and/or out-compete their smaller cousins. Consequently, introducing Mexican wolves into Colorado would most surely result in the loss of the subspecies that the FWS is seeking to recover.

Conversely, by focusing on recovery of wolves in suitable habitats within historic range, particularly with Mexico's assistance, the subspecies may be recovered in continued relative isolation, with a high likelihood

that genetic uniqueness of the Mexican wolf remains intact. Recent assessments of Mexico's potential to support Mexican wolves show promise, as a few large blocks of relatively remote landscape have been identified by researchers. Additional work is needed to better quantify the areas' capacity to support wolves. CPW and wildlife agencies in Arizona, New Mexico and Utah have urged the USFWS to engage with Mexican authorities in a more complete assessment of habitat south of the United States border. Until such an assessment is complete, it is premature to state that Mexican wolf recovery will require introductions of the subspecies into Colorado, far north of its historical habitat.

Wolf conservation in Colorado is best served by addressing the ecological requirements and impacts of wolves. Social tolerance by those who live, recreate and make a living in wolf habitat is also an important factor to be considered.

Several wolf advocates advance the perception that elk and deer populations in southern Colorado are overabundant and consequently, both of these potential prey species and their ecosystems would benefit from the presence of wolves. CPW has monitored the populations of both species for decades. Likely prey populations, like deer and elk, across southern management units have been producing fewer young, and managers have documented an alarming decline in survival of fawns and calves over the past 10 years. Eight of the 14 deer herds in southwest Colorado are far below management objectives, and are exhibiting low productivity. Such low recruitment translates to a low harvestable surplus; any additive mortality from predation will not be compatible with current deer herd management goals developed through a public process. In the past five years, post-hunt calf to cow ratios (the number of calves counted per one hundred cow elk) have declined precipitously in the Southwest and Southeast regions of the state. Cow elk harvest has been intentionally and dramatically reduced in southwest Colorado, at a considerable loss of hunting opportunity, to respond to concerns over elk populations and to keep elk herds within population objective ranges. This reduction demonstrates a lack of surplus elk in southern populations, and CPW plans to focus future research toward understanding survival of newborn elk calves. Consequently, the addition of wolves into southern Colorado would require a revision and further reduction of deer and elk management populations and harvest objectives.

While surveys of Coloradans about wolves have reflected general public support for wolves living in Colorado, the cost of having and managing wolves will fall squarely upon farmers, ranchers and sportspersons. That fact must be considered when the future of wolves in Colorado is contemplated. Wolves and wolf management is costly, and currently no funding source to pay to support wolves has been identified. CPW has been cutting its budget, programs and staffing since 2008. The agency cannot afford to take on the management of wolves while maintaining existing program responsibilities that serve residents and visitors to Colorado. Without additional funding, or reductions in existing programs to compensate for the increased expense, efforts to actively release wolves into the state are not possible. No wolf advocacy group has stepped forward and offered to fund a wolf management program.

CPW would prefer that wolves in Colorado not be listed as federally endangered or threatened, as we can adequately manage wolves as members of our state's wildlife heritage following the Colorado Wolf Management Working Group's recommendations at minimal additional cost. However, both subspecies (gray and Mexican) remain listed today.

The proposed resolution remains true to past wolf planning efforts; we believe that in the long run, it will allow all Coloradoans to be part of crafting and planning the future management of wolves in Colorado.