

WILDLIFE FOLKS WERE MISSING (At the 10/10/15 County Commission meeting)

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Emotions ran pretty high during last week's public hearing about the Socorro County Board of Commissioners wolf-human interaction ordinance.

Supporters and opponents of the Mexican Wolf Recovery Program made passionate pleas to the commissioners about the ordinance, which bars the release of the wolves in the county.

I would have to admit I was a bit disappointed the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service didn't send a representative to the hearing, which was held before the commissioners voted on the measure.

Representatives on both sides of the issue presented sound arguments.

But they also presented some pretty far-fetched ideas.

And that is where I believe having a representative would have been helpful.

There were plenty of statistics and dollar amounts thrown around. There were some pretty graphic wolf attack stories thrown around. There were some interesting solutions thrown around as well.

And there were plenty of discussions about science in the room, but only one person with a biology degree claiming to be an expert.

Among the thoughts thrown around at the hearing:

- The wolves being released into the wild were hybrids, or at least that was the claim of more than a few in attendance. From what I understand, the wolves proposed for release aren't hybrids. They are the same species of the wolves already in the wild. They aren't from the same actual family. Inbreeding, according to the wildlife officials I talked to, is one of the problems the wolves face in the wild as they try to face extinction.
- A calf being torn apart sounds like a woman screaming. That tidbit of information was offered up by a rancher from the northern part of the county.
- Wolves are attracted to children's voices. That was another thought offered by a rancher.
- An advocate for the wolves release expressed a belief the wolves should be released for spiritual reasons.
- A couple of other advocates believed the release of the wolves would be good for eco-tourism.
- A rancher suggested the net loss of a heifer could reach as high as \$1 million given the projected calves the heifer would have had, and the calves would have produced.
- A woman suggested a wolf park on the Sevilleta National Wildlife Refuge, which she believed would protect the ranchers while also helping the animal fight off extinction.

The idea was shot down by an opponent of the wolves' release, who said, among other things, that wolves can't read the signs that would limit them to the area inside the park.

It should be noted that the north Socorro County refuge already has a wolf management facility.

- One of my favorite ideas expressed at the public hearing? The Socorro County Board of Commissioners could use the legality of marijuana by states despite the federal government's objections as the basis of the defense of the ordinance it passed in case the matter winds up in court.

The board is basing its authority on the 10th Amendment, which I believe is a sounder defense than the "pot" defense.

But still, Socorro County and the state of New Mexico may face a steeper climb now that the Department of the Interior has given the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service the green light despite the local objections.

Just ask my native state of Alabama about fighting the federal government. Its record against the federal government is pretty much the opposite of the college football team bearing the same name has against its opposition.

The state's rights issue does raise some important questions. The chief of which is what happens if the Sheriff's Office receives a complaint about wildlife officials releasing a wolf on federal land?

In all seriousness, I felt advocates on both sides of the issue presented solid cases, although on this day, I felt the ranchers, horror stories aside, presented a little stronger case to the commissioners.

The potential financial loss to ranchers and farmers in Socorro and Catron counties is something that cannot be ignored. And the threat to human life, no matter how remote, can't be ignored, either.

But neither can the survival of a species.

That's why I appreciate the common sense approach by Socorro County Commissioner Martha Salas, who acknowledged the importance of the wolf to the eco-system. But she also acknowledged the importance of compensating for the losses suffered by ranchers and farmers and protecting human life.

Can the wolves be released while being only a minimal threat to ranchers and an even more remote threat to human life?

I'm sure ranchers would say no.

I'm sure advocates of the wolves would say yes.

There seems to be no middle ground.

But it would have been nice to have wildlife officials explain how it would be possible.

Or at least address some of the more interesting arguments presented at the hearing.