

Colorado says 'no' to introduction of wolves

NEWS

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In a move that drew praise from livestock and agricultural groups, the Colorado Parks and Wildlife Commission (Commission) approved a resolution Jan. 13 that prevents the active introduction or reintroduction of wolves into Colorado.

More than 10 years ago, the Commission 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 (WMWG), 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 Commission 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 generated considerable public discussion and concern.

The WMWG included members of Colorado agricultural and livestock organizations.

Colorado Cattlemen's Association (CCA) Executive Director Terry Fankhauser said, "We have had members and affiliates attend several of the wolf advocate meetings in the state to ensure our perspective opposing wolves in Colorado was understood."

Two CCA members served on the WMWG while others provided testimony at a hearing and wrote letters opposing wolf introduction in the state.

Fankhauser told *WLJ*, "Our opposition is fundamentally founded in science. Colorado is not appropriate habitat. There are too many people spread across the landscape not allowing for enough remote space for wolves to thrive." Secondly, he said, "We do not have an adequate prey base for the wolves, thus creating depredation on livestock and domestic animals."

Bonnie Brown, Executive Director of the Colorado Wool Growers Association, was on the WMWG and provided testimony at the Commission resolution hearing last week. In a statement provided to *WLJ*, Brown said, "We applaud the wildlife Commission for their common sense approach to managing wolves in Colorado. Wolf advocates tug at heart strings and raise funds with beautiful photographs on T-shirts and coffee cups. However, the reality of living with wolves is devastating economic and emotional loss for sheep and cattle ranchers that have livestock attacked by wolves; and it doesn't work out too well if you are deer and elk being constantly harassed by the ever-expanding wolf population."

Brown continued, "Wolf advocates fail to realize—or simply ignore the fact—that the Colorado Parks and Wildlife has to carefully manage diverse wildlife species within the state that has a rapidly increasing human population and limited habitat. The passage of the resolution opposing wolf introduction was an acknowledgement of the importance of sportsmen's dollars that fund wildlife management in our state, the impact on big game herds and livestock, and the habitat provided for all wildlife by farms and ranches in Colorado."

Colorado Farm Bureau (CFB) was also among the groups providing testimony on the resolution. Following the decision, President Don Shawcroft said, "We are very pleased with the Commission's approval of this resolution. Colorado Farm Bureau has long considered that Colorado is not suitable habitat for wolves. Additionally, the predation of wildlife populations by wolves, which is well documented, and human risk factors only increasingly validate the Commission's historic opposition to reintroduction."

CFB voiced concern over the high possibility for conflict with wolf/human interactions, Shawcroft said.

"While problematic interactions between wolf populations and domestic livestock populations would be expected, current laws that we see in other states only allow for protection of livestock in specific circumstances. A rancher who is protecting his livelihood will not have a chance to consult a lawyer to make sure the protection is justified should wolves be allowed for reintroduction."

Matt Robbins, Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) Public Information and Website Manager, told *WJ* the Commission listened to testimony and recommendations of the working group in making the decision. He said the action is a proactive approach and helps send a message to the USFWS that the state wildlife organization should be a part of wolf management plans. He noted single wolves have been seen in northern Colorado, and currently there are no known packs. However he said it is only a matter of time before the move into the state and CPW would like to help manage the species at that time.

As for Mexican wolves, Robbins said CPW doesn't believe Colorado is part of its natural range. Although animals have entered the state he said a single animal does not determine a natural range.

Managing the species is difficult from a state wildlife standpoint because the wolf is on the federal Endangered Species List. Robbins said, "We can't have a plan for a species that we're not allowed to manage. We would have to defer to the management plan set by the listing of the federal government."

Another factor that helped sway CPW to vote against actively reintroducing wolves is the cost. "Wolf management is costly and currently there is no funding to pay for support of these wolves," said Robbins. "Currently Colorado Parks and Wildlife receives no general fund, Colorado tax dollars to manage wildlife." He noted funding comes from limited sources including sales of hunting and fishing licenses. "The management of wildlife in our state is falling solely on the backs of those who hunt and fish. That's a challenge."

A sometimes overlooked component of introducing an endangered species in Colorado is that the state legislature has the final say. "Our state legislature retains the sole authority to approve Colorado's involvement in any introduction or reintroduction of a listed species within our state, and that includes wolves," Robbins told *WJ*.

He said the Commission and staff can't participate in the release of wolves without the express approval of the General Assembly.

While pleased with the recent decision, Robbins said CPW continues to work with neighboring states to understand the issue and to be available to USFWS officials as they move forward with wolf management plans.

"Animals will roam, and if they find a way into our state then we'll have to manage them," Robbins said, "unless they get into trouble. Then we have to honor them and protect them."

"CFB believes the reintroduction of wolves into Colorado is a no-win situation," the organization said in a press release. "Wolves will only negatively impact ranchers through animal losses, the state through hunting of big game, and the citizens of Colorado through restricted abilities to use public lands." — **Rae Price, *WJ* Editor**