



United States Department of the Interior

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

Mexican Wolf Recovery Program
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September 17, 2015

Patrick Bray, Executive Vice President
Arizona Cattle Growers' Association
1401 North 24th Street, Suite #4
Phoenix, Arizona 85008

Re: Proposed release sites on the Tonto National Forest

Dear Mr. Bray:

Thank you for participating in the proposed release and translocation sites meeting at the Pleasant Valley Ranger Station on August 20, 2015. I understand from Kent Laudon, of my staff, that your contribution to the process of evaluating proposed sites and your contributions to the overall dialogue were particularly helpful. We also appreciate your candor and constructive feedback and perspectives on the operation of the Mexican Wolf Recovery Program. We feel that the meeting was beneficial for all participants with the main goal for state and federal agency personnel to work together with local folks that have the best on-the-ground knowledge of those potential sites. It was also beneficial for all participating folks to have a strong two-way dialogue about the Mexican Wolf Recovery Program and the sometimes difficult realities on the ground. We feel this meeting served as a productive first step to continue the dialogue and further develop effective communication and relationships.

As you know, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) completed an environmental impact analysis of the reintroduction of wolves in the Mexican Wolf Experimental Population Area (MWEPA) in the 2014 Environmental Impact Statement for the Proposed Revisions to the Regulations for the Nonessential Experimental Population of the Mexican Wolf. The goal of this meeting was to assist the Forest Service (USFS) with their evaluation of the proposed release/translocation sites, and additionally to exchange information about the Mexican Wolf Recovery Program. The original eight proposed sites were selected by the Service with input from Arizona Game and Fish Department (AGFD) and USFS staff using an established set of criteria (e.g. topography, water, cover, human activities, big game density, etc.). As a next step in the evaluation process, the agencies collectively believed that it would be additionally beneficial to include local permittees' knowledge in the discussion and review of those sites. That process proved invaluable in rejecting four sites that were deemed excessively problematic as well as moving the remaining four sites forward for further consideration and evaluation. We are moving forward with further evaluation of "Breadpan", "Gunsight Butte", and "Red Lake East". The fourth site, "Hellsgate Wilderness", has since been ground truthed, appears less feasible, and has been dropped. The remaining three sites will be pooled with sites selected on

the Sitgreaves National Forest in the expanded release area for further suitability analysis and ranking. That process will vet the same criteria the group discussed at the August 20 meeting. We would also be very interested if local folks have ideas on additional sites that may even better meet the criteria than those we now have.

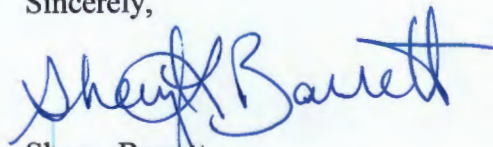
It's important to recognize that there is no place within the MWEPA to release or translocate wolves where there is a zero chance for conflict. Our goal is to select those sites that reduce the chance for conflict to the extent possible relative to all other sites. Further, it is our responsibility to manage those conflicts that do arise.

The USFS is conducting the environmental compliance for the use of the sites, pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act, and they anticipate completing the process by March 2016. Thus, releases or translocations into these sites could occur as early as spring 2016. As stated in the meeting, any individual site that is approved through this process may never be used; however, the list of sites, as well as their assessment, has to be available and complete when the opportunity to release or translocate a family group of wolves arises. Also, as discussed, wolves are long-range dispersers (e.g. leaving their natal pack), and it is reasonable to anticipate that dispersing individuals forming new packs in unoccupied habitat, including the Pleasant Valley Ranger District, will occur naturally. Sites in or near areas of an existing pack can become unusable for releases for the period of time that a pack is present.

Another item discussed at the meeting was the need for a broader public meeting to enable the Service as well as AGFD and the USFS to share information with local folks that live and work in and around the Pleasant Valley Ranger District. We would like to continue conversations with you and others regarding such a meeting and/or other approaches through which we can improve communication with the public.

Thank you again for your ongoing involvement and communication. I look forward to our meeting in Phoenix on November 10, when we can have further discussions on these issues. Please contact me at 505/761-4748 if you have any questions.

Sincerely,



Sherry Barrett
Mexican Wolf Recovery Coordinator

cc:

Debbie Cress, U.S. Forest Service, Arizona

Jon Cooley, Arizona Game and Fish Department, Phoenix, Arizona