

Editorial: Game board unfairly takes aim at gray wolf protector

Albuquerque Journal Editorial
Board

Playing tit for tat with an endangered species is not only unproductive; it's petty. Yet that appears to be what the New Mexico Game Commission did last week when it declined to renew a permit that had been in place for 17 years allowing Ted Turner's Ladder Ranch in the Gila mountains to assist the federal Mexican gray wolf recovery program.

Ever since the program began in 1998, the Turner ranch has worked with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to provide pen space for holding endangered wolves being taken from the wild or being reintroduced into the wilderness. Turner raises bison commercially on the 156,000-acre ranch in Sierra County and maintains it as a habitat for endangered and threatened species and for ecotourism.

Currently, there are just over 100 Mexican gray wolves in the wild – a species that once numbered in the thousands.

In the past, the Game and Fish director routinely signed off on the Turner permit. However, in November, the commission adopted a rule requiring commission approval for permits to keep wolves and other carnivores on private land for purposes of recovery or reintroduction. It appears to target the wolf program, and last week's action is likely to hamper its success.

Mike Phillips, director of the Turner Endangered Species Fund, said the commission hasn't had a problem with the ranch and suggested "they are opposed to the Mexican wolf recovery program as currently constituted."

That may relate to a new Fish and Wildlife Service rule that greatly expanded the wolves' range south to the Mexican border and north to Interstate 40 and broadened areas where wolves bred in captivity could be released. It also gave ranchers, who generally oppose the program, more authority to shoot wolves dead if they prey on livestock or domestic animals.

Unlike the Bill Richardson administration, which supported the program, Gov. Susana Martinez has not been friendly to it – even though it has been popular with many New Mexicans. A 2008 survey by Research & Polling found 69 percent either strongly supported or somewhat supported the program. In 2011, the governor-appointed Game Commission suspended state participation.

Landowner rights should not become as endangered as the wolf. Turner should be allowed to use his property as he wishes in cooperation with the federal government, and the commission shouldn't flex its self-granted power to punish a private landowner to make a statement.

This editorial first appeared in the Albuquerque Journal. It was written by members of the editorial board and is unsigned as it represents the opinion of the newspaper rather than the writers.