

County meeting focuses on wildlife

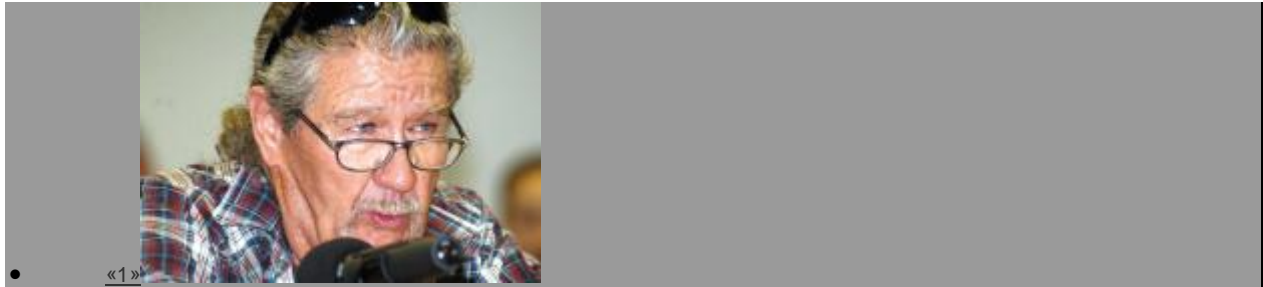
Burning issues in the Lincoln

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Bill Hornback comments on the proposed wildlife management criteria... (J.R. Oppenheim/Daily News)



The Otero County Commission's monthly meeting Tuesday breezed through unanimous approval of 10 items on their agenda in the first 10 minutes, to focus on the first of what will undoubtedly be many hearings about the creation of a wildlife management ordinance.

Discussion of the proposed ordinance, which specifically deals with introduced species, focused Tuesday on elk, the Mexican gray wolf and oryx.

Of the 45 attendees, some 80 percent were ranchers from several parts of Otero County.

Chairman pro tem, Commissioner Clarissa McGinn, told the group at the outset that "the county commission is in support of creating a draft for a wildlife management criteria ordinance."

Representatives from all viewpoints, with the exception of environmentalists, were present to express their views and concerns Tuesday.

Chris Turri of La Luz spoke of his distaste of hunters being pitted against ranchers, and he holds the Forest Service responsible.

"Ranchers have a right to their allotments of grasslands," Turri said. "The problem is mismanagement by the Forest Service."

Turri said that ranching is what shaped the Southwest.

"I don't think it's the agenda of any sportsman to take anything away from the rancher," Turri said. "And I don't think the county has the right to step in and take anything from anyone, whether it be rancher or hunter. Do you have any idea just how much revenue comes to Cloudcroft through hunting and ranching?"

Commissioner Mike Nivison said the county is doing that research.

"No county commission is versed in science," Nivison said. "I can certainly get those figures for you by tomorrow, but I need to say that the overall benefit to the county is a threshold of businesses. We're collecting true science according to the threshold we get from federal agencies.

"Our goal is to maintain the resource," Nivison said. "Hunting is a diversification, just like tourism is. It doesn't matter how many elk or cows you take out of an area, you're still going to have some kind of loss. Ultimately, the side with the best science wins."

Hans Steinhof, who called himself a "micro-rancher," addressed the commission regarding his concerns about compensation for damages caused by foraging elk, or by cattle that move off an allotment.

"I want to see something in this ordinance about compensation or funding for fencing," Steinhof said. "We end up having to pay for damages to federal or state land if our livestock get through a fence and damage their lands. Why shouldn't it work the other way? Why can't we, as ranchers, hold them responsible for damage that their elk do to our fences and our lands?"

Bill Hornback asked the commission where it is on determining road jurisdiction under RS-2477 for Lincoln National Forest. The county is proposing to use the federal law to declare roads that predate the Lincoln National Forest as county roads, so they can't be closed.

"We're working on that at this time," McGinn said.

"I'd like to see you coordinating your activities with other groups, like guides, who know these trails in the forest better than anyone," Hornback replied.

He also asked how the county would go about quantifying any damages caused by wildlife.

"Conceptually, we have been shown there are avenues to do this with," Nivison said. "The important thing is that we'll be able to defend our actions in court, should that ever happen."

"I am well aware that the elk issue is a big concern with cattlemen in this county," said Tim Turri, who operates a small outfitting business in the Lincoln National Forest. We'd like to find a better means to a common ground. Pretty much all New Mexico Game and Fish have done is to continuously raise hunting fees. I don't think the county has the authority to manage our wildlife, and I don't think it's any secret as to how much money hunters bring into Otero county. That's called tourism.

"If you do anything to reduce the size of elk herds, are you (the county) willing to compensate people like me who will be seriously impacted by such a reduction? How can we help the Forest Service to do a better job of managing our forest and improving the health of the forest?"

One rancher said state officials are also turning a deaf ear to their concerns.

"We have a problem in that New Mexico Game and Fish will not listen to us or even acknowledge our concerns," said Rick Lessentine, representing himself as a rancher and the Otero County Allotment Owners Association. "Even though we own the forage lands and the water, we get no compensation for damages by elk that destroy our fencing and damage our lands. The New Mexico Game and Fish Department doesn't take care of their elk. You'll never see them out feeding or watering their herds of elk, because it doesn't happen."

Joe Delk, representing the Paragon Foundation, spoke of the Mexican gray wolf recovery program.

"The wolves that were released in Arizona have moved into New Mexico," Delk said. "We now have 300 wolves in captivity just waiting to be released. There are currently six established, recognized packs of wolves in Arizona and New Mexico."

Delk said New Mexico Game and Fish has a group of biologists who manage these packs, but said that it is currently three days before people hear from the state as to the present locations of the packs.

"It's not the wolves I see as the biggest problem," said Delk. "It's the poor management. The wolves are leaving the Gila Wilderness area and moving into Lincoln National Forest. There is no prey base in the Gila. Last year, Sam Montoya, a friend of mine who hunts elk, said he came across at least 100 elk carcasses in Lincoln National forest that had been killed by wolves."

"I think we need to do something fast," said Charles Walker, a long time rancher in Otero County. "I appreciate the cooperation from the sportsmen and we'll certainly try to work with them. We got rid of the wolves once. My dad shot a few. I never saw one in my life. They say the wolves are needed in the environment, but I don't believe that. We don't need wolves any more than we need criminals running loose. We have a place for criminals and we have a place like that for wolves, too."

County officials thanked those who came to speak their mind Tuesday, and encouraged more residents to speak out.

"If you aren't part of the process, it doesn't work," said Nivison. "We appreciate all of you voicing your opinions on what you believe in, and want to make you all survivors in this process."

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