

NM Game Commission OKs end of ban on trapping

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ALBUQUERQUE - State game commissioners on Thursday approved a recommendation from wildlife managers to end a trapping ban in southwestern New Mexico, where federal officials have been working to reintroduce the Mexican gray wolf.

The commission voted unanimously in favor of the state Game and Fish Department's proposal during a meeting in Clayton.

The vote disappointed conservationists, who had sent thousands of emails and letters to the commissioners in recent weeks to support keeping the ban in place.

Regulated furbearer trapping on the Gila and Apache national forests was banned last summer by former Democratic Gov. Bill Richardson, a supporter of the wolf reintroduction effort.

The commission extended the ban last fall, giving researchers more time to study the risks of trapping and snaring to wolves.

The researchers are done with their work but a report summarizing their findings has yet to be made public, and conservation groups have accused the Game and Fish Department of colluding with trapping and livestock groups to influence the commission's decision-making process.

Despite a public records request, the conservationists claim the agency has refused to provide information related to meetings the department allegedly held with industry groups on the trapping issue.

The department, in a letter sent Thursday to the conservationists, denied claims that it hid documents.

Wendy Keefover, director of WildEarth Guardians' carnivore protection program, said she believes the commissioners had already made up their minds about the ban. Most of them were appointed by Republican Gov. Susana Martinez, who has expressed concerns about the wolf program's impacts on ranchers.

"It's a kangaroo court," Keefover said.

WildEarth Guardians and the Sierra Club claim documents they received as part of their records request indicate that agency officials met with the Sportsmen and Landowners' Coalition about the trapping rules on June 16. The agency provided no records of the meeting except emails that tangentially referenced it.

The groups claim the documents also show a department employee circulated a petition for the New Mexico Trappers Association in support of trapping.

Reconsideration of the trapping ban stemmed from a recommendation made by a small business task force appointed by Martinez after she took office in January.

The furbearer rules were specifically mentioned in an April report prepared by the task force, which reviewed dozens of rules in an effort to identify ways the state could be more business-friendly and encourage economic development.

The panel suggested local economies could be "enhanced" by removing the trapping ban in wolf territory.

While it's unclear what the researchers found when studying the risks to wolves, an executive order signed by Richardson last summer noted that traps do not differentiate between wolves and the animals for which traps were set.

He said at the time there were six confirmed and three probable Mexican gray wolves trapped in New Mexico's portion of the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area in the past eight years. Five wolves were injured by the traps, two severely enough to require leg amputations.

Conservationists had applauded Richardson's stance and the commission's decision last year to extend the ban, calling it a milestone for wolves in the Southwest.