



Wilderness, Wolves and Voluntary Grazing Permit Retirement In the Greater Gila Ecosystem

Summary

WildEarth Guardians' Gila campaign will protect the threatened wildlands and endangered wildlife of the Greater Gila Ecosystem through administrative and legislative grazing permit retirements that will maximize biodiversity protection and potentially leverage congressional designation of nearly two million acres of national forest wilderness. As the birthplace of Aldo Leopold's Land Ethic, the homeland of the Nation's first wilderness area and habitat for one of the most endangered mammals in North America—the Mexican gray wolf—the Greater Gila Ecosystem is deserving of our Nation's highest level of environmental protection.

WildEarth Guardians is optimistic about this campaign for several key social, political, ecological and economic reasons, including: 1) we have already engaged more than a dozen ranchers and after discussing our program, have the immediate potential to reach joint agreements to retire their national forest grazing permits; 2) we have secured a \$500,000 commitment from a private individual to provide the initial financing for permit retirements ; 3) the current failing wolf recovery program demands a new set of viable solutions and; 4) the change in federal administration and the new congressional delegation in New Mexico and Arizona create an opportunity to move progressive legislation through Congress.

Problem Statement

The campaign to recover the Mexican gray wolf, once a proud symbol of the U.S. government's effort to restore large carnivores to the public lands of the American West, has languished in the last few years. Notwithstanding its status as one of the most endangered mammals in all of North America, the Mexican wolf is now trapped, killed and persecuted, even in places like the Gila Wilderness – America's first designated wilderness area. Today there are fewer than 50 wolves in the wilds of southwestern New Mexico and southeastern Arizona and the population has declined four out of the last five years. As a result, a mere ten years after its celebrated reintroduction, the lobo is potentially facing the ignominious distinction of becoming extinct in the wild for the second time.

There are a litany of ecological, social and political problems that have hindered the Mexican wolf recovery effort from its inception, with the biggest being opposition from the livestock industry. The Gila, though in certain respects extremely well suited for wolves, in other respects has the mix of social and cultural elements that when combined with historical land-uses help to explain why the program has not yet met with success. Additionally, local communities which have been extremely hostile to the wolf recovery program since its inception have become emboldened in

recent years by the opposition of the Bush Administration and Congressman Steve Pearce to the goal of wolf recovery.

The Gila is an extremely challenging location for wolf recovery largely because of the nearly ubiquitous presence of livestock and the absence of federal leadership. For example, unlike the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem where the National Park and its surrounding public wildlands provide three million acres devoted to wildlife protection, the Mexican wolf recovery effort is occurring within a sea of extractive uses, including livestock grazing. Domestic livestock graze nearly 90 percent of the 4.4 million acres of public land within the wolf recovery zone--much of it yearlong. (See Map 1)

It is clear that this program is in desperate need of an infusion of creative new energy to enhance the prospects for landscape-scale wolf recovery throughout the 4.6 million acre Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area.

Vision and Goals

WildEarth Guardians believes that the current situation in the Greater Gila Ecosystem is ripe for conservation solutions that not only enhance wildlife protection but also provide an opportunity to secure significant, permanent protections of public wildlands. We envision using the social and political desire for conflict reduction concerning wolves, a desire that we believe is shared from all sides of the issue, as a vehicle to implement a bold conservation vision that not only secures habitat for keystone and iconic wildlife like the lobo, but also permanently protects two million acres of roadless lands (or takes major steps towards doing so).

Our bold conservation vision is also grounded in the ecological and historical significance of the Greater Gila Ecosystem to conservation and the conservation movement. The Gila National Forest is the birthplace of America's wilderness movement. It was here in New Mexico and Arizona in 1924 that Aldo Leopold convinced his supervisors in the Forest Service to create the Gila Wilderness. The Gila is also a biological gem with dozens of unique and rare wildlife species and millions of acres of unprotected roadless lands. Leopold's interaction with this unique landscape and its wild inhabitants also provided the raw ecological material that later helped form Leopold's land ethic, an understanding that still informs science and guides the conservation movement to this day.

For these reasons, the Gila is more than just a biological gem with a failing wolf recovery program and threatened wildlands. It is a landscape of national if not international significance. As a final matter, the timing of this campaign is also historically significant because 2009 is the centennial of Aldo Leopold's first presence in the Southwest.

This campaign has three inextricably linked goals: 1) further wolf conservation and overall biodiversity protection; 2) retire public land grazing permits on millions of acres of public lands and; 3) where possible, use grazing permit retirement as a springboard for wilderness designation.

Existing Investments and Future Activities

WildEarth Guardians has secured and/or made several key political, financial and intellectual investments over the last twelve months that make this campaign poised for success. First of all, over the last six months, we have communicated in person with nearly a dozen public lands ranchers that are extremely interested in voluntary grazing permit retirement. (See Map 2) These ranchers are keen on being compensated in exchange for voluntarily relinquishing their grazing

permits. Furthermore, there is an opportunity particularly right now because the livestock industry in the Gila is in transition. Many ranches are for sale, including several with grazing permits in key wolf recovery zones. In fact, over the last three years, ranches controlling grazing permits on more than 408,000 acres of national forests have been sold--some of it to conservation buyers who are supportive of permanent permit retirement legislation. Presently, ranches controlling over 375,000 acres of public land grazing permits are for sale. (See Map 3) This transition provides an opportunity to create a new culture and a new vision for the landscape of the Gila.

Likewise, we believe that consensus is building amongst the conservation community, the U.S. Forest Service, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, state wildlife agencies and the relevant congressional delegations that the single most beneficial action for Mexican wolf recovery is the retirement of grazing permits on public land. We have worked with these agencies, private academics and the conservation community to map grazing allotments and prioritize which allotments, if voluntarily relinquished and then retired, would best serve wolf conservation. (See Map 4)

In addition, *WildEarth Guardians* has secured a \$500,000 commitment from a conservation minded individual to provide the initial funding to support voluntary permit retirements. We are currently working on securing another \$500,000 commitment. All monies used to compensate ranchers willing to relinquish their grazing permits and support their retirement will be held in an escrow account. We estimate that an ambitious permit retirement effort -- on more than two million acres of roadless land -- would require approximately \$15 to 20 million.

The next steps in implementing this campaign are securing specific permit retirement agreements and ensuring that those grazing permit retirements are linked to wilderness designation. We have drafted "real estate option" agreements modeled after agreements that Oregon conservation groups and public lands ranchers with grazing permits in the Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument are using. It is our intention to secure at least six to eight of these agreements by early next year. We have identified these permittees based on three criteria: 1) interest; 2) presence of wolf habitat and; 3) presence of roadless and/or wilderness lands. All of our high priority permittees control allotments within wilderness or roadless lands, although not all of these allotments overlap with wolf habitat. Map 1 provides the location of willing permittees as well as other demographic information about ranchers and the allotments they control.

The ten grazing permittees that we have identified as high priority prospects control more than 250,000 acres of public land, over half of which is in roadless or wilderness habitat. Assuming that we can convince these permittees that a significant portion of their compensation is linked to wilderness designation, we believe we will have an extremely strong coalition to advance this idea. Once our coalition is formed, we intend to secure congressional sponsors from New Mexico and Arizona, and we will work to introduce legislation in the 111th Congress, which is our primary goal. Though introduction of legislation is merely the first step in the process, it will be the culmination of much other work that will indicate that our strategy is viable.

Our vision is simple. We believe that in places where chronic conflicts exist between large carnivore recovery efforts and livestock production, a market approach can break the current logjam and expedite wolf recovery. We believe our strictly voluntary approach will be attractive to all the parties involved, especially permit holders. We also believe that grazing permit retirement provides a unique opportunity to leverage permanent protection for public wildlands. It seems only

fitting that in the landscape of Leopold, the conservation movement works to honor that legacy with a comprehensive strategy that protects both public wildlife and wildlands.

Mary Wommack 4/9/09 4:27 PM

Comment: Have you considered possible adding "individuals" to the final sentence/formula? Your vision inherently takes into account the needs and interests of the individual permit holders, so why not give yourself credit for considering them?