

Broken Promises

Gene and Ginger Whetten moved to the Adobe Ranch in southwestern New Mexico thirteen years ago to raise their family in the lifestyle they love. Since 2000, they have been living with the impacts of a federally reintroduced predator, the Mexican Gray Wolf – dead and missing livestock, lost profits, litigation threats – and there’s no end or help in sight. The Center for Biological Diversity takes credit for the wolf introduction as their “first major victory.” “Does their victory include frightening mothers, forcing children to carry firearms for protection, having the school build wolf-proof child shelters at bus stops so the children have a safe place to wait to go to school, and destroying our livelihood?” Ginger Whetten asks.

“When it all first started, the environmentalists and agency people would try to work with us, but now they don’t even follow their own rules,” Ginger said. “In the beginning, they removed several wolf packs that were depredating, but now don’t do anything at all to help, really.”

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service began the reintroduction program in 1998, as a result of litigation by environmental activist groups, such as the Center for Biological Diversity, Audubon Society and National Wildlife Federation. The population of wolves was designated “experimental, non-essential” under the Endangered Species Act, which was said to give more management flexibility to the federal agencies who are also charged with protecting our families and ranches.

Wolves have been a constant presence on the Adobe Ranch since 2000. “That year, we had a pack of wolves here killing calves,” Ginger said. “We went a few years with no problems, and the last few years it has been constant. For a while, we had a pack of wolves living in one of our cowboy’s front yards, and later, a pack in our front yard. We don’t let our children go outside unless they’re carrying a gun, I’m leery of letting them go down to the barn alone.”

Raising their four children on the ranch, working and spending time together as a family, brought the Whettens to the remote ranch, but much of that has been lost to the constant stress of the wolves. “It has changed our lives drastically,” she said. “The

wolves are on our property and our minds all the time. It's taken away a lot of the fun of living here. It's not what we wanted for our family."

The financial impacts to ranchers are enormous. In 2007, the Whettens had nine wolves living right below the house, killing cattle every night, and estimate that they lost \$100,000. In addition to the death loss, the wolves run the cattle constantly and keep them from gaining weight. Time that should be devoted to keeping the ranch going is spent monitoring wolves. An entire day is lost with every wolf kill, Ginger said, because it takes that long to find the dead calf, skin it out, call the authorities and get it documented.

"This year, we've found nine or ten dead calves, and pieces of 14 more. That doesn't include those that you never see, that you just know are gone because a cow comes in with a tight bag," Ginger said. "It has been a big financial hit for us and an even bigger one for some of our neighbors who only run 50-100 head of cattle. When the wolves get in on them, it just wipes them out. They can't make it. It is heartbreaking to watch as they lose their livelihoods and way of life."

"Because of the financial, emotional and social impact of the wolves on our front porches and in our barns and because of pressure from environmental groups keeping the federal government from helping us, we went to Catron County and asked if the County Commission could help protect our families and children," she continued. In 2007, the County Commission adopted an ordinance which was designed to give its citizens some relief at least from those wolves who were living in our front yards. The Center for Biological Diversity sued the County for protecting its citizens. The County spent over \$100,000 defending its ordinance and its citizens. The federal court ruled in favor of the County, but the toll has been tremendous. Even with this loss, the CBD and other radical groups have not been dissuaded. They have filed two more cases in Arizona to stop any help we would get from the federal government—not based upon whether our lives and property should be protected but based upon alleged procedural errors by the government. These groups have also filed a third case in Arizona and one in the District of Columbia. These cases are not aimed at whether the wolf should or

should not be there; these suits are based on bureaucratic errors and time lines over which we have no control. Yet we have to live with the results.”

The Whettens have made significant changes to their operation to try and protect their livestock, and have tried to work with the agencies and other parties involved in the program. “We’ve hazed wolves, moved cattle, and are now running yearlings rather than mother cows,” she noted. “The whole program is now to the point that everything rests on the shoulders of the ranchers, and I don’t see any help forthcoming.”

Ranchers can submit confirmed wolf kills to the Defenders of Wildlife for compensation, and the Whettens do participate in that program. Payments are made at the discretion of the organization, and only on confirmed kills, a small percentage of actual losses. “It really upsets me to read that ranchers are losing calves but are being compensated. That is just not true. The compensation fund is a good publicity stunt for enviros, we almost hate to take their money.”