

Essex
Park

The Trall-Gazette, Friday, October 15, 2004 Page A 7

Commissioner, audience have differing views on wolves

A group of Estes Park residents and others challenged Larimer County Commissioner Bender's assertions about wolves at a community meeting Tuesday night at the Senior Center.

Commissioner Bender, a member of the Wolf Management Planning Group, said he has been holding meetings throughout the county to get information from his constituents about how they feel about having wolves in the state.

"Everybody" in Larimer County he has spoken with is against wolves, he said at the meeting.

"Most of the people I know are in favor of having them back in the state," Sarah Babbitt, a resident of Fort Collins who attended the meeting, said. "I'm concerned Commissioner Bender is distorting the facts and not representing his constituents."

Commissioner Bender provoked arguments and antagonism from some of the nine people who attended the meeting when he appeared to favor the livestock industry over other interests, such as tourism, that might benefit from the return of wolves to the state.

Commissioner Bender is a member of the Colorado Farm Bureau, according to its executive vice-president, Ray Christensen. The Farm Bureau is adamantly opposed to the return of wolves because of the potential for predation on livestock.

But Commissioner Bender has not disclosed his affiliation to the Wolf Management Planning Group, according to Rob Edward, a wolf advocate and Sinaapu's director of carnivore restoration, who is also a member of the group. Nor did he mention it during the meeting, although he said he was a tree farmer.

Members of the Wolf Management Planning Group were appointed by the Colorado Division of Wildlife to draft recom-

mendations to the Wildlife Commission for the management of wolves that migrate into the state. The members of the group include biologists, outfitters, sportsmen, wolf advocates and two county commissioners. They are working with mediators to draft a plan they can all agree on - a daunting task indeed.

Commissioner Bender told the people at the meeting wolves have difficulty living at high altitudes especially in the winter because of the cold, and thus would follow deer and elk into town during the winter and cause problems, such as traumatizing people by killing and eating elk in their back yards.

But his assertion is not entirely scientifically accurate. "Wolves are pretty well adapted to high arctic conditions," Dave Armstrong, professor of ecology and evolutionary biology at the University of Colorado-Boulder, said. "So obviously high elevation would not be a problem."

Commissioner Bender asked people how they would feel if they had to witness a wolf-kill, but no one flinched.

Similar problems exist with mountain lions in the Fort Collins area, Babbitt said.

"People kill animals for food too, but it's hidden in slaughterhouses," Edward added.

"Humans have to see what is real with nature and within themselves," Mike Wagner, geography major at the University of Colorado in Boulder told Commissioner Bender. "Nature is a balance between order and chaos. It's always been that way."

Wolves chasing elk around might be beneficial if they chase them off private lands so hunters can shoot them, Commissioner Bender said. Another plan is to use helicopters and dogs to chase elk off private lands. The outfitters and sportsmen members of the Wolf Management Planning Group don't want

wolves to reduce the number of elk and deer for hunters, he added.

"The local people enjoy the wildlife," Madeline Framson firmly told him. "It's an asset to our tourism here. Over time people learn to live with wildlife." Framson is a member of the Shining Mountains Group, the local chapter of the Colorado Mountain Club. She challenged Commissioner Bender to talk to the tourism industry about the value of wolves for Colorado.

"We get over three million visitors. A high priority is to see the wildlife." Realtors also use the presence of wildlife in their ads to attract potential buyers, she pointed out.

When Commissioner Bender didn't pursue the issue of the impact of wolves on tourism, Framson protested. "Tourism is the largest industry in the state!"

"No, agriculture is the largest industry in the state," Commissioner Bender said. "If you start driving out agriculture, it's going to be replaced with houses."

"Is that happening in Wyoming?" Framson asked.

"No, but that's because it's so sparsely populated," he answered.

"Is Wyoming or Idaho so different from Colorado?" Edward said.

Some people in the group expressed concerns that livestock producers were being given too much consideration when it came to the subject of wolves returning to Colorado.

"We need to listen to other people besides them when we decide these issues," Babbitt said.

An argument broke out over the issue of compensating livestock producers for losses due to wolf predation. Compensation funds are potentially available through the Colorado Division of Wildlife and Defenders of Wildlife, a national organization. But

requirements for proof that a wolf killed the rancher's animal has made the Defenders of Wildlife's compensation program controversial in the Yellowstone area.

Wolves eat the entire animal, Commissioner Bender said. Sometimes there is no evidence of the kill at all, let alone enough evidence to prove a wolf did it.

"Isn't that wonderful?" Framson said. "They don't waste."

Babbitt objected to subsidizing ranching by compensating ranchers for wolf predation. "The livestock industry is already getting help in a variety of ways," she said. For example, ranchers are allowed to graze cattle on public lands.

"They don't consider renting public lands a subsidy," Commissioner Bender said, as ranchers are required to fix damaged fences and otherwise.

maintain the public lands they use.

As another argument started, Edward raised his hand. "This is not what we should be debating," he said. He began to discuss the opportunities to reintroduce wolves into Colorado. It is unlikely anymore than a handful of wolves would be able to make it into Colorado on their own, according to scientific studies, he said. They would have to come through open areas of Wyoming and would be subject to being shot by ranchers in order to get here.

But reintroduction is not what the Wolf Management Planning Group was set up to do.

Reintroduction involves capturing wolves, bringing them into the state and releasing them. Migrating wolves are wandering into Colorado on their own looking for territory or mates. When the wolves

are no longer under federal protection, individual states will need plans to guide management decisions.

Rocky Mountain National Park is considering the possibility of reintroducing 14 to 20 wolves as part of their Elk and Vegetation Management Plan, Therese Johnson, Park biologist, said. Although the Park has the authority to act independently of the Division of Wildlife, it is unlikely they will do so.

"We're not bound by state management decisions, but we would like to be in synch with the state," Vaughn Baker, Rocky Mountain National Park superintendent, said.

Many of the people attending the meeting seemed disappointed and surprised to discover the issues they were disputing were not related to a potential reintroduction plan.