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### Gray Wolf Reintroduction in the Northern Rockies

The reintroduction of the gray wolf on the western slope of Colorado was voted on November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2020. Colorado proposition 114, the gray wolf reintroduction initiative would fully reintroduce wolves in the area by December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2023. The proposition was narrowly passed by the citizens of Colorado. The votes in favor of reintroducing the wolf were mostly from urban citizens. The new state statute is facing backlash from multiple organizations and communities in Colorado. The statute has also received praise from organizations and communities that are for gray wolf reintroduction in the area. The gray wolf is listed as an endangered species by Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW). There are multiple stakeholders involved in the process of reintroducing wolves into Colorado.

### **Stakeholder Analysis**

Colorado Parks and Wildlife are responsible for implementing the reintroduction program. Their main goal is to implement a working management plan for Colorado. The management plan includes public involvement in the program. This includes decision making and compensation strategies. The CPW commission group is concerned with wolf and human interactions. The commission group is concerned about the environmental implications of the gray wolf returning to Colorado. The other concern the group has is the economic side of the program. The program needs to factor in compensations for cattle that are lost to the wolves. The recreational activities in the area that might affect the local economy.

The United States Fish and Wildlife service (USFWS) is concerned with the species and the ecological implications of the gray wolf being reintroduced. Since the gray wolf was listed on the federal endangered species list until 2022, where it moved to the states endangered species list. The USFWS are concerned about endangered species and their ability to survive in their habitat and if they can thrive as a species. The USFWs and CPW work together to create the management plan best suited.

Local agriculture and farming communities are major stakeholders in the wolf reintroduction plan. The agriculture community is against the reintroduction of wolves due to there being livestock killings. They are concerned about attacks on their livestock along with their crops. The community is also concerned with the diseases that can accompany the wolves as well and cause harm to the livestock. They are concerned with the compensation plan that is included in the management plan through Colorado Parks and Wildlife. The reintroduction plan impacts their livelihood and the local economy.

The Colorado Wolf Coalition is in favor of bringing back the gray wolf. They value the education of the public to better understand gray wolf behavior and ecology. They value public involvement in management of the species. The coalition also values engagement with Colorado citizens and learning about the benefits of wolves returning to the ecosystem (Rocky Mountain Wolf Project, 2021). The wolf coalition is concerned with the public's opinion of gray wolf reintroduction and trying to reshape attitudes towards the predator.

The Colorado Farm Bureau are against the reintroduction on wolves. They value the life of livestock and the communities near where the wolves would inhabit. They are against an established wolf population in Colorado, they are for the migratory wolves that cross into Colorado. The bureau is concerned for the livestock that might be harmed from wolf attacks and

the compensation programs in place by CPW. The farm bureau work closely with other stakeholder groups such as Coloradans Protecting Wildlife, a group made up of ranchers, recreationalists, and conservationist. They value the way of nature and wolves should not be managed by humans, but they will come back to Colorado naturally. They also value the lives of other wildlife and how they might be impacted by the wolf returning to Colorado. They were heavily against proposition 114.

Stop the Wolf Coalition is an organization that includes multiple rural counties in Colorado. The coalition is concerned with the interactions between the wolves and humans. They are also concerned with elk and deer populations declining in areas that the wolves are being reintroduced to and where in the state they might migrate to. They value to opinions of ranchers and cattlemen in the rural communities The coalition believes that wolves will make their way back into Colorado on their own and human reintroduction is unnecessary and creates problems for communities across the west (RMEF, 2019). They value wolves coming back to Colorado on their own and that human reintroduction causes more disruption to an already fragile ecosystem.

### **Facts and Science**

The decision to reintroduce wolves back into the Northern Rockies was passed by ballot proposition 114, that would require “paws on the ground” on the Western Slope by 2023 (Brasch, 2022). This means by the end of 2023 there needs to be a stable population of gray wolves in Colorado. The management plan from CPW also needs to be fully completed and implemented in the Northern Rockies. Wolves were hunted to extinction in the 1940s. Since 1940 Colorado has witnessed lone wolves across the state. The lone wolves are from other states such as Idaho, Wyoming, and Montana. There has not been an established wolf pack in Colorado since the 40s (CPW, 2019). The reintroduction plan included six wolves that can mate and

produce a stable population of wolves in Colorado. Since wolf reintroduction has been successful in other western states it is only a matter of time before they start to migrate back into Colorado.

The wolf is a keystone species in the ecosystem. The wolf has been successfully reintroduced in other western states such as Idaho and Wyoming, and Montana. The reintroduction of the wolf in Yellowstone National Park is a successful case of wolf reintroduction in the U.S. Yellowstone was experiencing ecosystem degradation since the wolf eradication in the 1930s and 40s. Once the wolves were gone the elk population in the park rose at rates that the environment could not handle (Bath, 2008). A higher elk population put massive pressure on other species such as rabbits and plant species. The elk were grazing through the park causing a decrease in the park's vegetation. The reintroduction of wolves stabilized the park's elk population. With the elk population being controlled this allowed for plant species to flourish, establishing the needed trophic cascade. Wolf reintroduction helped the ecosystem to thrive (Beschta and Ripple, 2016). The data from Yellowstone can be implemented into the reintroduction of wolves in the Northern Rockies.

### **Decision Making Context**

In 2020 the U.S Fish and Wildlife Service removed the gray wolf from the endangered species list in the lower 48 states (USFWS, 2022). The gray wolf would no longer be protected federally under the Endangered Species Acts (ESA). The ESA allows wolves to be federally protected and makes harming, hunting, and killing gray wolves a federal offence. Management was then shifted to Colorado Parks and Wildlife. In February of 2022 the United States District Courts appealed the decision by the USFWS and returned the management of gray wolves back into the hands of the federal government rather than the state. Under the management of CPW the wolf remained a state endangered species that made the take of a gray wolf in Colorado

Illegal (CPW,2022). The wolf is currently listed as endangered by the USFWS and is still being protected by the ESA.

The shift of management to USFWS means that Colorado no longer has any jurisdiction of the species that currently reside in the state. This has caused some challenges between Colorado Parks and Wildlife and US Fish and Wildlife Service. The management plans need to go through the federal government instead of the state. The state would have little say in the plans unless they have a special designation for experimental populations (Brasch, 2022). The special designation is a part under the ESA. This allows provides some flexibility when it comes to the management plans, Colorado could possibly have more control over the management and implementation plans. The state of Colorado losing their jurisdiction can make it more difficult for state biologists to track the populations. The state biologists have attached tracking collars to the wolves, under the new ruling the state wildlife biologists cannot capture the wolves without getting the permission of the federal government. This has caused some issues between CPW and USFWS.

The change of management has implications for ranchers protecting their livestock which has been a challenge in the reintroduction process. There have been attacks on livestock from wolves in Colorado. Colorado Parks and Wildlife have already paid a rancher \$1,800 in cattle damages from a wolf pack (Blumhardt,2022). With the killing of livestock, the Colorado Parks and Wildlife Commissions has allowed for hazing techniques for ranchers and farmers to protect their livestock. The authorization of the hazing allows people to use nonlethal methods to scare the wolves away from the livestock. The ESA does not allow these types of techniques along with lethal techniques. Ranchers and farmers would not be allowed to protect their livestock due

to the implications of the ESA. The switch in management causes disruption in policy making and management plans of the grey wolf.

The ruling in February, which made the gray wolf relisted on the endangered species list has proven to be a challenge for Colorado citizens. The USFWS is now in charge of “paws on the slope” creating new challenges to meet the deadline by December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2023. The USFWS must go through the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) process. After to court’s ruling Colorado must produce an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), this process makes sure there are no long-term negative implications for reintroducing the wolf. EIS requires a lot of time and can take years to complete. The federal law replaces the state law, the voter mandated statute cannot take place until the NEPA process is finished (Blumhardt, 2022). The NEPA process can take years to complete, making the reintroduction timeline pushed back for months if not years.

### **Policy Solutions**

With the constant change in management for the reintroduction of wolves in Colorado makes it difficult to make policies for wolf reintroduction. Policies made by USFWS must consider the ESA when making management decisions. The state does not have to take the ESA into consideration if the wolves are not listed as endangered. With the wolf being in a position of being on and then off the list makes it difficult to make policy. This creates a challenge to who is allowed to create the policy and management plans. This can cause frustration for ranching and agriculture communities; there is uncertainty on if hazing techniques to scare wolves are legal or not.

A policy solution for reintroducing the gray wolf back into Colorado would be keeping management and decision making as local as possible. Keeping the management local builds

trust between the public and managers (Manzanillo, 2021). Building the relationship between the public and managers is necessary for the policy and ecological side of the reintroduction. This relationship improves social tolerance towards gray wolves, teaching people how to live with wolves.

There is not a perfect solution that would satisfy all stakeholders. The Stakeholder Advisory Group (SAG) have been meeting with all the stakeholders and discussion all their concerns with the wolves. The SAG has been working with the community on the best ways to meet all the stakeholders' concerns. They have already decided on a reimbursement plan for livestock killed by wolves, this is just a start to many discussions to follow. Addressing the livestock that has already been attacked by wolves is necessary to decrease any tensions between the animal and human (Campbell-hicks, 2021). Having these concerns addressed in the stakeholder advisory group is needed to help make the best possible managerial and political decision.

The policy solutions for wolf reintroduction are limited to the policies already in place. One of these policies being the Endangered Species Act, Colorado is limited to what they can and cannot do when it comes to policy and management plans from wolf reintroduction. The animal is protected under federal law and not state law. The ESA limits what citizens can do to protect their crops and livestock; under the ESA they can only kill wolves if a person is in direct danger. Wolf reintroduction policy is complicated and there is no perfect solution, incorporating the voices of all citizens is the best way to create policy.

## **Discussion**

The reintroduction of the gray wolf in Colorado is complicated. There has been successful wolf reintroduction in other western states. The difference between those

reintroductions and the one in Colorado is the population and economic development currently being seen in the state. The government needs to consider these factors in their management and policy plans. Colorado Parks and Wildlife will need to balance the biological and the human interest (Purtell, 2020). The government needs to consider all stakeholders to get a well-rounded management plan that includes both the science and the concerns of Colorado's citizens. As of right now the reintroduction plan is to be finish by the original timeline of December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2023, and the gray wolf is listed on the endangered species list.



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