Some groups seek permission to kill or remove them.

Gray wolves return in pressure challenge in the West

The Nation
A few questions come to mind.

Where do these extra thousands of Puerto Ricans go?

What is the government's next move?

Why haven't we heard from the government about this?

What is the government doing to address this?

Who is responsible for this?

What is the government's plan to deal with this crisis?
Anger boils without water in Ore.

Farmers, allies condemn limits on irrigation to protect species

By Patrick McMahon
USA TODAY

KLAMATH FALLS, Ore. — Shouting “water, water, water,” several thousand residents on Tuesday welcomed a convey of anti-government activists carrying an empty, 12-foot-tall bucket into town.

The giant bucket symbolized farmers’ fight against the federal government’s decision to limit water supplies for fear of harming endangered fish. Oregon has been suffering through a drought, and federal irrigation water was shut off for a time in the spring to protect endangered fish, and another shutdown is imminent.

The bucket, hoisted onto the town plaza in front of the Klamath County Government Center by crane, also reflects growing anger in parts of the West over federal environmental policies.

“This bucket represents the very best and the very worst of the United States,” said Klamath County Commission Chairman Steve West. “The worst, he said, is a federal government “seduced by its own bureaucratic power.”

“This is a fight for our lives,” said local resident Richard Ruegger, 50. He wore a button saying “Stop the Rural Genocide” and a light-blue ribbon symbolizing water.

The bucket was brought in from Elko, Nev., and was accompanied by truck convoys carrying food, supplies, and money from Montana, Nevada, and California. The protesters paraded through downtown during the morning, then drove to a “Freedom Day” rally at the fairgrounds that featured speeches by former congresswoman Helen Chenoweth-Hage, a conservative Idaho Republican.

Although some residents were concerned that the rally could be a flashpoint for violence, none was reported. “I was assured that this would be a peaceful crowd and that the militia types would not be coming,” Sheriff Tim Evinger said. He estimated the downtown crowd at 4,000 and the rally crowd at 2,000.

The timing of the rally coincided with another controversial step in the area’s struggle over water in Upper Klamath Basin that the government has reserved to help endangered species — the suckerfish and coho salmon.

When water was not released in the spring for irrigation, almost 1,400 farms went dry. Since late July, farmers have been getting irrigation water ordered released by Interior Secretary Gale Norton. Those rationing, however, are expected to stop on Thursday.

The latest deadline has people here in mind as they wait to see whether the federal government will shut the gates that hold back the water and whether activists will try to reopen them.

“I’ve heard people say they’ll make sure the water keeps flowing,” said Barbara Martin, 40, a real estate agent who said she has been at the headgates almost every day for more than a month.

“We’re concerned about the health and safety of our employees, but we’re going to do what the law requires,” Interior Department spokesman Jeff McCracken said.

In a statement, Norton urged local, tribal, and federal officials to keep searching for solutions.

Water in the Klamath basin has been regulated for years. Local Indian tribes have had water rights since the mid-1800s, and the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation was directed by Congress to develop an irrigation plan in 1905.

The government had provided water for 94 consecutive years. But this year’s drought and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s order requiring higher lake levels led to the crisis.

It is the same drought that lowered lake levels behind hydropower projects throughout the Northwest, forcing utilities to find higher-cost alternatives and raise electric rates. The drought also has produced conditions fueling many of the ongoing forest fires in Oregon and Washington.

The neighboring Klamath Tribes say that even if the Endangered Species Act didn’t exist, there would still be a water crisis in the basin.

“The real problem is the federal government promised people more water than the rivers and lakes can supply, while at the same time encouraging so much habitat loss and pollution in the forests, streams and marshes that the watershed itself has been damaged,” said Allen Foreman, tribal chairman for the Klamath Tribes.

Foreman urged the convoys of protesters to go home. “Their message will actually hurt farmers and ranchers in the basin by raising false hopes and discouraging people from coming together to focus on the search for workable answers,” he said.

The parade route was lined with signs espousing many conservative causes, but the most prominent was reserved for environmentalists and the Endangered Species Act.

People such as Hank Nichols, 70, and retired, see a much broader threat to a way of life. “They use the sucker fish like the spotted owl,” he said, recalling logging cutbacks in the early 1990s after the owl was listed as endangered.

They done it to the loggers, they’ve done it to the miners, they did it to the fishermen, and now they’re after the farmers,” Nichols said. Environmentalists, he said, “won’t be happy till they’ve destroyed an entire way of life.”
Interior Department caves in to grizzly bear scare

Our view:
Effort to return bears to the Northwest runs into roadblock.

In 1997, more people were killed by vending machines than by grizzly bears. But as a final decision on whether to reintroduce grizzlies into a remote area of the Northwest, bears are trampling such facts. A carefully negotiated plan to bring the bears back is stalled, and opponents are busy stoking public concern by emphasizing, as Idaho Gov. Dirk Kempthorne recently did, that the grizzly is a "flesh-eating, anti-social animal."

Left unsaid is that in the wild, grizzlies pose little risk. In Yellowstone National Park, home to 400 or more grizzlies, five deaths have been recorded over 150 years.

So late last year, after more than a decade of negotiation, a coalition representing the timber industry, conservationists and state and federal agencies agreed to reintroduce 25 bears to the 1.2-million-acre Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness, a remote area on the Idaho-Montana border surrounded by millions of acres of national forest.

This summer, though, Interior Secretary Gale Norton shelved the plan, citing technical reasons and political opposition. Next week is the deadline for filing formal objections to Norton's action, after which Norton will make a final decision.

The now-nixed idea was to release bears gradually into the wilderness over five years. The animals would be classified as an "experimental population," which would allow grizzlies that caused problems to be relocated or killed. An effort would be made to prevent them from entering the region's only populated area, the Bitterroot Valley in Montana. And a local citizens committee would manage the entire program.

The goal in 50 to 100 years: a stable population of roughly 280 bears scattered over an area bigger than most states.

Government biologists who helped develop the plan say experience suggests the risk of bear attack is as low as one injury per decade and one death every few decades. And the terms negotiated by local interests would provide greater economic protection than at present.

Risk to humans too great

Opposing view:
Grizzly bears are not endangered. Bush right to end Idaho program.

By Dirk Kempthorne

What is the cost of a human life sacrificed for an experimental federal program? Before leaving office, the Clinton administration proposed a plan to bring grizzly bears into Idaho under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). But the grizzly bear is not endangered. There are thriving populations of bears in Alaska, Yellowstone National Park and Canada.

Nevertheless, the plan assumed injury or death to people and even calculated the value of human life. A human killed by a grizzly bear in Idaho would cost the federal Treasury between $4 million and $10 million, and the plan even amortized the annual costs at $80,000-$200,000. As far as we know, this is the first time that death or injury to humans has been factored into a program proposed by the federal government under the ESA. I find that repugnant.

All of this was cooked up in a program that was vigorously opposed by two Idaho governors, the state's entire congressional delegation, the Idaho Legislature and the Idaho Fish and Game Commission.

The Endangered Species Act didn't require bringing grizzlies to Idaho, but the Clinton administration attempted to justify it under a section of the ESA that was originally designed by Congress to invite support for species recovery by providing for flexible management. However, the plan left the final decision-making authority in Washington, rather than in the states as promised.

President Bush has rightly declined to impose this deadly program on Idaho. Instead, the Interior Department, led by Secretary Gale Norton, has indicated that Idaho's concern about human safety and reasonable implementation of the ESA should be heeded. This is better than a Washington, D.C., view of how things should be done in Idaho.

The president's approach recognizes that real recovery of endangered species must come with the support of the states. This is precisely the reason the governors of Idaho, Montana, Oregon and Washington state — two Republicans and two Democrats — reached an agreement last summer on how to recover salmon in the Pacific Northwest.

The federal Endangered Species Act should follow this model. The federal government's financial resources should be spent recovering species that are already endangered instead of on payments to American families who may be victims of grizzly bear attacks.

Dirk Kempthorne is governor of Idaho.
Snowmobilers rush for last ride

As ban looms to protect Yellowstone, enthusiasts are roaring in from all over USA

By Tom Kenworthy
USA TODAY

WEST YELLOWSTONE, Mont. — When Congress established the nation's first national park 129 years ago as a "pleasuring ground," it could hardly have imagined the scene that will unfold this holiday weekend at the western entrance to Yellowstone National Park.

More than 3,000 snowmobiles will likely roar through the gate and up a groomed road alongside the Madison and Firehole rivers to Old Faithful and beyond, their riders marveling at the park's mighty bison herds and spectacular geothermal displays. Trailing in their wake will be a cloud of blue exhaust and the piercing whine of their engines.

For much of this winter in Yellowstone, there's been a kind of last roundup mentality, as snowmobilers respond to the Clinton administration's decision to phase out snowmobiles here by the winter of 2003-04. In record numbers, some weekends, snowmobilers are pouring in from across the country, even as local business leaders and their political allies hope for a reprieve from the Bush administration and Republican Congress.

Now President Bush and Interior Secretary Gale Norton address the ban, adopted in December, will say a great deal about their approach to federal land management questions. Both environmentalists and those who favor more commercialized use of the public domain will be watching.

The struggle over snowmobiles in national parks is one sense as old as the park system itself, established by Congress for the twin purposes of conserving natural resources and allowing for their public enjoyment. How to reconcile those goals has repeatedly flared into controversy, often here in Yellowstone, where officials concerned about air pollution, noise and harassment of wildlife last year finally removed the welcome mat for snowmobiles.

On a snowy road near Old Faithful, tourists out on a snowmobile tour are greeted by a sign that says "No snowmobiles allowed in this area." The sign is surrounded by a snow-covered landscape.


Flow almost non-stop.

From mid-December to mid-March, snowmobiles swarm along West Yellowstone's streets at all hours of the day and night. Some mornings, as they warm up their machines to head out to explore Yellowstone or the 400 miles of trails in the adjacent Gallatin National Forest, a blue cloud of exhaust hangs over downtown.

To many shopkeepers here, that blue smoke is the color of money, and they say they are worried, even angry, about the looming ban. Before there were snowmobiles in Yellowstone, most of the businesses were boarded up in winter and people were on unemployment waiting for summer to come.

By Robert W. Ahrens, USA TODAY

By John Brecher, Jackson Hole News, via AP

It's anybody's guess what will happen when snowmobiles are banned and travel into the park will be by snow coach only, except for one cross-park road kept open for cars.

Town administrator Fred Rice says he's "cautiously optimistic" that West Yellowstone will adapt, that people will still visit the park and snowmobile on trails in nearby national forests. But there have been no studies to assess the potential impact on tourism.

Some in West Yellowstone await the change eagerly.

"People come to our town and treat it like a playground; they run wild," says Scott Carley, who runs snow coach and ski tours. He looks forward to a future of "a pristine Yellowstone National Park without snowmobiles, with a Chamber of Commerce interested in the forest outside with the best snowmobiling in the world."

Sen. Craig Thomas, R-Wyo., says he believes that the advent of cleaner, quieter machines could usher in a compromise that would allow snowmobiling to continue on the park's 181 miles of roads.

That goal could be achieved by legislation or possibly an amended winter use plan.

But Mike Finley, Yellowstone Park's superintendent, says snowmobiles are fundamentally incompatible with the park and violate a string of statutes, executive orders and rules dating to almost 30 years.

He adds that new technology will do nothing to protect wildlife, as he shows a video of a pack of snowmobile riders stampeding bison at a time when the animals desperately need to conserve energy.

"Any administration can revisit an issue," Finley says, "but what you can't change are the facts -- intermittent high levels of air pollution across roads and at the entrance station that often make park employees feel like they are living in aو."
The eagle has landed; beachgoers say 'Duck!'

In Hampton Beach, N.H., a young bald eagle swoops down on a rubber football at the Atlantic shore. The bird has been harassing beach visitors.

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

The impromptu message of the eagle was one of anger and a warning to the public. "People are being stupid," said the eagle, soaring above the crowd. "I'm just trying to protect my nest from this constant harassment." The eagle has been observed feeding on fish and birds in the area, and it is clear that the public's behavior is causing disturbance to the bird's natural habitat.

The National Park Service has proposed a new goal for park service operating budgets. The director of the park service says an independent voice is needed to ensure that public parks are operating efficiently. The federal government has increased funding for park operations, but the service has struggled to manage the increasing costs.

The report recommends that future budget proposals should include more investment in park infrastructure and maintenance. The service has reported a decline in visitor numbers, and the infrastructure is in need of repair.

The report also highlights the need for better communication with the public. The service has faced criticism for its handling of natural disasters and its response to visitor requests.

The National Park Service is working to improve its public relations and communication efforts. The service has launched a new program to engage visitors and provide more information about the parks.

By Tom Konyaty

USA Today