

High Country News

FOR PEOPLE WHO CARE ABOUT THE WEST

Can a grazing buyout program ease life for wolves and ranchers?

A fledgling effort in New Mexico's 'Yellowstone of the South.'

April Reese | Feb. 24, 2014 | *From the print edition*

GLENWOOD, NEW MEXICO

About 200 cattle graze the 28,000 acres of Alan Tackman's postcard-pretty ranch. Most of its grasslands and rocky crags lie within the Gila National Forest, and Tackman often rides his horse through the two grazing allotments he leases from the U.S. Forest Service, checking on his cattle and enjoying the view.

"It's steep, rough country," says Tackman, a burly, genial man with white hair. "I think it's beautiful, but I may be biased."

Every now and then, a calf or cow comes up missing. Harsh weather, injury or mountain lions are the usual suspects, but for the past 15 years, there has been a new one: Mexican gray wolves, reintroduced by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1998. Tackman says that over the years three different packs have taken up residence on one of his allotments, and the number of surviving calves there is half that of the wolf-free allotment he leases.

"The only difference is the wolves," says Tackman, who estimates he has lost \$20,000 worth of livestock – mostly calves – to the predator. "Wolves and cattle cannot co-exist."

As in other parts of the rural West, the combination of bovines and wild canines has stirred a long-simmering conflict here, deepening antipathy among ranchers, environmentalists and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and impeding the Mexican wolf's recovery in its historic U.S. range. Only 83 or so wolves roam the greater Gila ecosystem – a vast tumble of mountains, canyons and forests in southwestern New Mexico and southeastern Arizona that is largely publicly owned – yet their mere existence has provoked a fierce reaction. Some ranchers and conservative county commissioners periodically demand that the federal wolf program be scrapped, warning that wolves will attack pets and children as well as livestock (though there are no confirmed reports of Mexican wolves attacking humans). Opponents have filed several lawsuits, and more than a few wolves have been illegally shot.

Meanwhile, environmentalists, who consider the Gila the "Yellowstone of the Southwest," have used federal law to force land and wildlife agencies to better protect wolves and reduce cattle grazing. So you wouldn't expect to see Tackman sitting with environmentalist Bryan Bird in the Adobe Café in the tiny town of Reserve, N.M., on a crystalline blue-sky October day. Even more surprising, the two were openly discussing a possible deal that could aid both wolves and ranchers – and perhaps help temper the region's polarized political atmosphere.

The terms of the deal are straightforward: In exchange for giving up his federal permit to graze cattle on 25,000 acres of prime wolf habitat, Tackman will receive several hundred thousand dollars from Bird's group. (Neither party would disclose the exact amount.) Tackman is ready: "I love ranching, but I can't make a living here," he says. "I just have a permit that's rough (country) and full of wolves. At this point, I just want out."

Bird tells Tackman that there is a slight delay in getting the money together; some of the funders are hesitating because they don't trust the Forest Service to permanently retire Tackman's allotment. But rest assured, he says, WildEarth Guardians, based in Santa Fe, 270 miles northeast of here, is lining up congressional support for a bill authorizing permanent retirements in the Gila. Even before it passes, it will give donors the confidence to write checks.

As Tackman leaves the wood-paneled café, he warns Bird: "If this is not done by the first of the year, I'm done."

Bird replies: "It's gonna get done."

If only it were that simple.

WildEarth Guardians is hardly the first environmental group to dangle cash in front of ranchers. About a decade ago, activists launched the National Public Lands Grazing Campaign, an ambitious effort to boot cattle off millions of acres across the West. But they failed to convince Congress to pass across-the-board legislation authorizing buyouts. Greater success has come at the local level, in places like Utah's Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument and the national forests surrounding Yellowstone National Park. The National Wildlife Federation has probably been the most successful, making deals to clear livestock from more than half a million acres in the Yellowstone region, in part to protect habitat for the northern gray wolf, the Mexican wolf's larger, more ashen-hued cousin.

But, though the Gila is as wild and rugged as Yellowstone – and even more ecologically diverse, with desert grasslands giving way to ponderosa forests and spruce-thick mountaintops – it differs in many ways. For one thing, the Yellowstone bioregion is anchored by a huge and iconic national park, where livestock are *verboten*. The Gila, however, is managed almost entirely by the Forest Service. Its wild core consists of three wilderness areas, which are grazed by more than 60,000 cattle, domestic sheep and goats. Furthermore, ranchers in the Northern Rockies only graze livestock during the summer, while most Gila ranchers run cattle year-round.

Northern Rockies ranchers "have thousands of private acres (each); here, we have hundreds," says Tackman, whose own ranch includes just 70 private acres. "And a lot of it up there is irrigated, so they can grow a lot of hay and run a lot of cattle."

The year-round presence of cattle increases the likelihood that a wolf will augment its typical elk-meat diet with livestock. It also makes for a landscape significantly shaped by cattle – a condition that, environmentalists say, keeps the Gila from realizing its wild potential.

"Our vision is to make the Gila one of the best-protected landscapes in all of North America," says John Horning, WildEarth Guardian's executive director. A slight man with arrestingly blue eyes, Horning cut his teeth as an activist here 15 years ago. The first lawsuit he ever filed, back in 1996, argued that the Forest Service failed to analyze the ecological consequences of issuing grazing permits. Over the next six years, he estimates he filed half a dozen lawsuits on the Gila and Arizona's neighboring Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest.

"It came from a place of deep frustration about deep impacts on the ground," recalls Horning, sitting at the conference table in WildEarth Guardians' pueblo-revival-style office building near downtown Santa Fe. "There were places in the Gila that were ... just grazed to the bone. And to add insult to injury, they were habitat for endangered fish and birds, Gila trout, Apache trout, a dozen or so endangered species. We brought a ton of litigation that was trying to remove that threat."

Horning's fight was personal: Aldo Leopold, one of his conservation idols, whose tenure as a federal forester in the Gila in the 1920s influenced his famous land ethic, convinced the federal government to create the nation's first wilderness area here – 40 years before Congress passed the Wilderness Act.

WildEarth Guardians won some battles and lost others, but "about six or seven years ago, we decided to make a strategic shift in how we would approach grazing," Horning says. "Basically, the divide we went over was recognizing that grazing, though it's a privilege on public lands, from a strategic perspective could be treated as a right, and that therefore it's compensable. And if we were to compensate ranchers (for retiring grazing permits) it would provide us common ground with them in potentially moving forward a new conservation vision for the greater Gila."

So Horning, who grew up on the edge of Rock Creek Park in Washington, D.C., and Bird, who has a master's in conservation biology from New Mexico State University, quietly launched a buyout program. They started by poring over detailed maps of grazing allotments – the same ones they used to plan litigation – looking for those with the best wolf habitat and connectivity to the Gila and Aldo

Leopold wilderness areas. If enough of the region's 120 or so ranchers accepted buyouts, they reasoned, Mexican wolves would have hundreds of thousands of cattle-free acres to roam without getting shot or relocated, the federal government's response to serious wolf-livestock conflicts. And with about half of the 4.2 million-acre greater Gila qualifying as potential wilderness, grazing retirements could make it easier to lobby Congress for new wilderness designations, providing another layer of landscape protection. Tackman's own allotments include 19,000 acres of wilderness-quality roadless lands.

Through letters, phone calls and face-to-face meetings, Bird and Horning made their pitch, focusing on ranchers who, like Tackman, were ready to get out of the business. (Tackman has tried to sell his permit twice before, once to The Conservation Fund and once to a neighbor.) Over the past several years, a dozen or so ranchers have expressed interest, but progress remains slow. Late last fall, Tackman's deal was still the only one that was a signature and a check away from happening; two others stood waiting in the wings. And Horning and Bird continued to meet resistance from ranchers, Forest Service officials and even the potential donors who were underwriting the buyouts.

"The big challenge is getting enough ranchers," Bird says. "I've gotta get 10 at least. But they want to see others doing it (before they'll commit). They don't want to be the first to go."

Even if it weren't run by a hard-hitting environmental group, a grazing buyout program in the Gila would likely encounter resistance. For the past four decades, Catron County, which includes much of the Gila ecosystem in New Mexico but has fewer than 4,000 residents, has figured prominently in the rural West's so-called Sagebrush Rebellion, a loosely organized movement that resists environmental regulation and federal authority over public lands. In the early 1990s, fourth-generation rancher Kit Laney refused a Forest Service order to remove his cattle from the Diamond Bar allotment in the Gila and Aldo Leopold wildernesses, warning that if federal agents tried to remove them, Catron County supporters would greet them with guns. In November 2004, Laney was sentenced to five months in prison after pleading guilty to assaulting a Forest Service official and obstructing a court order.

Many locals opposed the Mexican wolf reintroduction program even before the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service transported seven from a breeding facility in Mexico and released them into Arizona's Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest in 1998. (Back then, New Mexico barred the release of wolves in the state, although the animals often migrate from Arizona.) Since then, the program has remained entangled in controversy. Catron County officials have gone so far as to build "wolf-proof" cages around school bus stops, ostensibly to protect children. Illegal killings of wolves – 46 so far, with four prosecutions – as well as legal killings by federal wildlife agents have helped keep the predator's population below the government's goal of 100 individuals despite periodic reintroduction of more wolves. Just last fall, someone shot a young male wolf with an arrow in Catron County.

But despite popular perception, the Gila's ranchers are not a social or economic monoculture, and with the average age of permit-holders at 66, an increasing number are seeking greener pastures. According to an analysis of Forest Service data by WildEarth Guardians, more than 1.5 million leased acres in the Gila region – about 45 percent of all permitted acres – changed ownership between 2005 and 2012. About 27 percent of the permittees now live outside of New Mexico. Recent permit buyers include a lawyer from Texas, a North Carolina eye doctor and a California businessman.

"It's very rare that you get local people buying," says Tackman, who grew up in Washington, D.C., before moving out West to work for the Forest Service, tend the family ranch and earn a law degree from the University of New Mexico. "It's mostly out-of-state people with money."

"This place is changing really rapidly, culturally and economically," adds Bird. "Land and permits are changing hands fast. The window of opportunity has never been more open."

That worries Caren Cowan, executive director of the New Mexico Cattle Growers Association. Though she says her group will not interfere with deals like Tackman's – Cowan sees buyouts as a private-property matter – it does not

support permanent permit retirements and opposes the buyout bill WildEarth Guardians is pushing Congress to pass.

"If you don't have something out there grazing, keeping down fine fuels, you're just going to see more fuels contribute to the fires we've seen in the past few years. And the buyouts would accelerate that," Cowan says. "If the federal government ever decides to fund these things, we're looking at a critical impact West-wide."

Bird and Horning face plenty of hurdles beyond the ranching community, including the Forest Service itself, which sets many of its grazing policies at the local level and traditionally has been reluctant to permanently retire allotments. The Forest Service ranger overseeing Tackman's allotments approved the retirement of his grazing permit but refused to make it cattle-free forever. Retired allotments can be reopened whenever forest management plans are revised, which happens every decade or so. Only an act of Congress can permanently retire an allotment.

On the neighboring Alpine district in Arizona, ranger Rick Davalos has declined to sign off on WildEarth Guardians' proposed deal with another rancher, Terry Reidhead, even though Reidhead no longer runs cattle on Escudilla Mountain and says he hasn't turned a profit on the allotment since 1999 due to drought and competition with elk. "The direction that I would like to go in is not necessarily retiring allotments," says Davalos, "but making these allotments available as grass banks, which would give us more flexibility in managing the national forest."

Davalos says grass banks – unleased areas that could be used in an emergency – would give ranchers a place to move their cattle when wolves are on their allotments, or when drought or wildfires reduce forage. (The 2011 Wallow Fire burned 538,000 acres in the Alpine area.) Bird sympathizes with the Forest Service's desire for flexibility, but says the grass banks idea is "like a crutch. It's like, OK, we know we have too many cows on the land, and we know we have wildfires, drought, and we're just going to move cows around to perpetuate this unsustainable industry in the area."

The relationship between the Forest Service and ranchers is complicated. Forest Service district rangers often have range-management backgrounds and understand what it takes to raise cattle. But they also work for the federal government, and ranchers often disagree with the rules they impose.

"While we strive for good relationships (with the Forest Service), we don't always have good relationships," says Cowan. "It's our belief that they don't always use science when they're making their decisions." WildEarth Guardians has often made the same claim, arguing that rangers sometimes overlook the ecological impacts of livestock to avoid flak from ranchers and local politicians.

The agency responsible for the wolf recovery effort – the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service – is also curiously reluctant to support buyouts. "The Fish and Wildlife Service is focused on working with ranchers and other partners to implement measures that reduce wolf-livestock conflicts and to provide fair compensation for depredations," Mexican wolf recovery coordinator Sherry Barrett wrote in an email. "Allotment ownership and/or management is not an issue with which we are involved."

In 2011, the agency set up a "Mexican Wolf /Livestock Coexistence Council" made up of ranchers (including Tackman), environmentalists, tribes and county officials. The council compensates ranchers when wolves kill livestock and is developing a plan to provide incentives for ranchers who host wolves on their lands, Barrett said. The agency is also taking steps to strengthen the Mexican wolf program, proposing new rules that would allow wolves to roam a larger area (currently, wolves that wander outside what's known as the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area, which encompasses all of Apache and Gila national forests, are captured and brought back to the area or moved to a holding facility) and permit captive-raised wolves to be released on both sides of the state line. Bird and Horning say they welcome these changes, which could be adopted sometime this year, but don't believe they will ease wolf-livestock conflicts.

The lack of federal support for permanent grazing retirement has made raising money for buyouts difficult. To reassure potential donors, WildEarth Guardians has worked with New Mexico Sen. Martin Heinrich to introduce a bill authorizing

permanent buyouts in the Gila. Horning says the bill and the pending Tackman buyout are in a chicken-and-egg conundrum: Members of Congress would like to see a consummated deal before committing to authorizing legislation, and funders want to see the legislation in place before cutting a check.

But by Thanksgiving of 2013, the bill had passed a critical hurdle, gaining approval from a key committee. That helped Horning convince a foundation to write a check. Still, the group was about \$100,000 short of Tackman's price. Tackman grew increasingly frustrated: "They're losing their credibility with the Forest Service, with ranchers, and they're going to lose their credibility with Heinrich and Udall if they don't get on the horse pretty soon," he said.

Bird was all too aware of the stakes: "I know if I didn't come through for the Tackmans, my name would be mud."

As the Gila endured an eerily snowless new year, Bird remained hopeful that the program he has poured five years of his life into would soon get over the hump, largely because of the relationships he has built. "The more I go down there and work with these people, the more I realize a couple of things," he said in January. "One is that we both love this landscape dearly. Sometimes they see things a little differently in how that landscape gets utilized, but they do love it. And the other is that we're both highly principled people."

Hank Fischer, who for more than a decade has spearheaded the National Wildlife Federation's grazing buyouts around Yellowstone National Park, knows the importance of finding the common ground well. He says his earlier work running Defenders of Wildlife's predator compensation program gave him credibility with ranchers.

"I think they knew we were trying to address the problems," Fischer says. "So I think they were more receptive to a buyout than they would have been otherwise."

His advice to Bird and Horning: Build relationships, one rancher at a time. "Since these are the first ones being done down there (in the Gila), it will take some time to get that acceptance."

Undoubtedly, WildEarth Guardians' long history of tussling with ranchers and the Forest Service puts it at a disadvantage. But Horning hopes that his group's unabashed activism will eventually win some grudging respect. "We don't soft-pedal our biocentrism or our love of wolves or even our disdain for ranching," he says. "But we're trying to offer them some concession that hopefully they feel will keep them whole. And I think that kind of candor and honesty is the foundation of a good relationship."

By early February, Bird and Horning had put most of the money to pay Tackman in an escrow account. But another snag had emerged: Glenwood District Ranger Pat Morrison, who had agreed to sign off on the MOU, retired on Jan. 1. Debbie Cress, the new district ranger, wanted to review the deal and have her superiors in Washington take a look at it before signing off. "I'm just getting my feet wet," Cress said. "We are looking into getting support for that (buyout)."

As this issue went to press, the deal remained in limbo awaiting Cress' decision. Bird made the five-hour trip to the Gila once again to see if he could settle things in person, but the Glenwood District is still "a wild card," he said in a Feb. 5 email.

For Alan Tackman and Terry Reidhead, the waiting game, frustrating as it's been, will be one worth winning.

"I wasn't for the wolf reintroduction," Reidhead admits. "We've been making a living off this old forest for 100 years. But it's a steep, rugged allotment and it's probably better suited for wildlife than anything. If you can't beat 'em, join 'em."

For Tackman, who plans to continue ranching where there are no wolves, closing the deal with Bird and saying goodbye to the lands his family's herds have grazed for four decades won't be easy.

"On a rational level, it was not difficult. On an emotional level, it's very difficult," he says. "When he gives me that check releasing me of my permit, I'm going to cry."

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