

CHAPTER SIX

Pushing an Anti-Wildlife Agenda

“The ruling is a major victory for Farm Bureau. This ruling culminates more than three years of litigation on this issue. The ruling vindicates the Farm Bureau position that the wolf reintroduction program failed to address the concerns of farmers and ranchers, and represented overzealous regulation by the government.”

— Dean Kleckner, AFBF president,
December, 1997.

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In December, 1997, a federal district judge in Wyoming dismayed wildlife conservationists across the nation with an unexpected ruling. The judge ruled that the reintroduction of wolves by the federal government in 1995 and 1996 in Yellowstone National Park and on federal lands in central Idaho had been unlawful and that the new and thriving wolf populations must be removed.

The ruling, which was later overturned by a higher court, was chiefly the result of a lawsuit brought by the American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF) and three state farm bureau federations.

The Farm Bureau has made battling wolf recovery a cause célèbre. Virtually everywhere wolf reintroduction has been proposed, AFBF’s leaders or those of its state affiliates have voiced opposition.

Farm Bureau leaders claim that the wolves represent a land grab by federal bureaucrats using wolf recovery as a pretext for booting cattlemen off public lands where they have grazed their livestock for generations. In an essay posted on the Farm Bureau’s website, Montana Farm Bureau executive vice president Jake Cummins argued that environmental leaders “don’t care whether the wolves live or die” and claimed that “the whole wolf program was a fraud. The real goal was to use the Endangered Species Act to expand federal land use control. Neither the federal government nor the leaders of the major environmental groups have ever really cared a hoot about the welfare of the wolves.” Environmentalists simply want to “redistribute wealth by consolidating power in the federal bureaucracy,” he said, suggesting that such people still admire “the Communist ideal.”

WHY SAVE WILDLIFE?

"We believe that modern society cannot continue to operate on the basis that all species must be preserved at any cost. All state and federal actions designed to protect alleged threatened and/or assumed endangered and threatened species pursuant to the ESA must demonstrate that the benefits to humans exceed the cost to humans."

— AFBF 1999 policy manual.

"Many predators such as the grizzly bear and some wolf species are contributing very little tangible benefit to the American people, and the extinction of the dinosaur, brontosaurus, pterodactyl, sabertooth tiger and countless other species is not hindering the occupation of earth by the human race. Therefore be it resolved NMFLB strongly urge that the endangered species act be reworted..."

— New Mexico Farm and Livestock Bureau 1999 policy manual.

AFBF's effort to stop wolf reintroduction is only one aspect of a much broader anti-wildlife agenda. AFBF has been urging Congress to rewrite the Endangered Species Act (ESA) so that species could be protected only if doing so satisfies a strict cost-benefit economic analysis. Under the AFBF proposal, modification of endangered-species habitat would no longer be prohibited. Furthermore, the Farm Bureau says no U.S. species should be listed if it can be found in another country.

The Farm Bureau would also like to put con-

servation groups at risk if they propose animals or plants for listing under the act. The Farm Bureau suggests that anyone proposing a listing should "be required to post a bond for damages incurred if the species are subsequently not found to be endangered or threatened." In the event that this altered version of the ESA might still protect any plants or animals, the Farm Bureau wants taxpayers to compensate landowners for any resulting "reductions in property values or for the loss of use of property."

At AFBF's 1999 convention, delegates adopted a wildlife pest and predator control policy calling for legislation "which would require the control of wildlife including endangered species" that damages crops or kills livestock. The policy recommends that property owners "have the right to control predators in any way possible" if the animals cause damage on private land — meaning that ranchers legally could kill wolves, grizzlies or other protected species. Delegates also voted to petition for dropping wolves and grizzly bears from the endangered species list and to oppose further introductions of bison on federal land. Another resolution called for abolishing the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Other policies on wildlife approved at the convention ran the spectrum from the improbable to the downright bizarre:

- A resolution on wildlife management objected to the "federal policy" of allowing wildlife to graze rent-free on federal lands. This policy "is discriminatory to other grazing users who pay for forage on an animal-unit-month basis," the resolution said. The same resolution called for renaming prairie dogs "prairie rats" so

that people will no longer think of them as “comparable to poodles.”

- Another resolution supported everyone’s right to own a reindeer regardless of race, creed or national origin. Currently only native Alaskans are allowed to keep reindeer.

- To help salmon recover, the Farm Bureau favors eliminating or controlling such salmon predators as sea lions and seals. AFBF would also like to “privatize salmon fisheries for stronger fish.” The bureau did not explain exactly how private hatcheries might produce stronger stocks of salmon — and little scientific evidence exists to back up that conclusion. The National Marine Fisheries Service, the Idaho Fish and Game Commission and organizations representing university biologists have all agreed that breaching some dams on western rivers would give endangered salmon the best chance of survival. But AFBF strongly opposes that option.

Over the years, AFBF has regularly opposed plans to aid wildlife regardless of the impact on agriculture. And state farm bureaus seem to be doing all they can to interfere with species protection and recovery. For example:

- The Idaho Farm Bureau opposed designation of the Snake River Birds of Prey National Conservation Area which protects the habitat of North America’s densest concentration of raptors.

- The Idaho Farm Bureau also pushed a bill in the state legislature to require the federal government to obtain the legislature’s permission before any species could be reintroduced. “We love this bill,” said a Farm Bureau legislative alert, “and even though preservationists will argue that the ESA gives the Feds the right to

trample all over the State of Idaho, this bill sends the message that we don’t necessarily like it.”

- The Wyoming Farm Bureau staked out a position against reintroduction of endangered black-footed ferrets.

- The Illinois Farm Bureau listed “delay in the introduction of wild elk into rural areas of Illinois” as one of its major accomplishments for 1998.

- The Missouri Farm Bureau worked against a ballot initiative to outlaw bear wrestling. Animal fighting had been illegal in Missouri for 112 years until the state supreme court overturned the law in 1985 as too vague. A 1998 initiative reinstated penalties for baiting or fighting animals. The bureau argued that the initiative “could unintentionally call into question the use of live fishing bait, prohibit common rodeo practices by subjugating to a national rodeo association the authority to determine what local rodeo events are legal, and interfere with traditional quail and raccoon hunting practices.” But voters approved the bear wrestling ban by a 62.6 percent majority.

PRAIRIE DOGS/PRAIRIE RATS

The South Dakota Farm Bureau is urging the federal Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service to control prairie dogs by any means necessary. Prairie dogs are keystone species, that is, their presence in the ecosystem is critical to many other species. In 1989, Defenders of Wildlife sued the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to stop the use of above-ground strychnine baits against prairie dogs, ground squirrels, meadow mice and other animals. Defenders argued that these pesticides also killed

some 60 nontarget, federally protected species, including 15 threatened or endangered species. The Farm Bureau unsuccessfully intervened in the lawsuit, arguing for continued use of the poisons.

The Colorado Farm Bureau is fighting attempts to list black-tailed prairie dogs as threatened. The bureau contends that if the prairie dog is listed, all hunting and poisoning programs would have to be discontinued and landowners might be required to develop habitat conservation plans. Prairie dog numbers have declined radically in recent years as the animal's habitat has been converted to other uses. This dwindling species is the sole food source for endangered black-footed ferrets, arguably the rarest mammal in North America.

LYNX CONSPIRACY

Efforts to reintroduce the lynx in Colorado could mean the end of agriculture in the state, according to the Colorado Farm Bureau. In a letter to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the bureau insisted that listing the lynx as threatened in Colorado could stop agricultural use of public lands. "This is just a misguided attempt to halt economic development in struggling rural areas," wrote Buford Rice, executive vice president. "If the lynx is listed, it could effectively terminate every agricultural activity, existing or proposed, in Colorado."

The Colorado Farm Bureau also says it is concerned that reintroduction of a predator would put more pressure on livestock, although the lynx is not known to prey on sheep or cattle. The lynx is already on Colorado's endangered species list. In 1998, the bureau tried unsuccess-

fully to stop the state's reintroduction of the lynx in the Rio Grande/San Juan National Forest. Bureau president Roger Bill Mitchell voiced fear that introduction of an additional predator might "place other species in jeopardy of becoming endangered."

PANTHER FLIP-FLOP

The Florida Farm Bureau in 1998 went on record opposing reintroduction of endangered Florida panthers in the northern part of the state, citing alleged threats to domestic livestock and private-property-rights restrictions. Panthers have nearly disappeared from southern Florida, in part because of inbreeding and highway deaths. Scientists have also discovered that toxic chemicals from agricultural runoff and other sources may interfere with the panthers' ability to reproduce. It was hoped that bringing panthers into northern Florida would improve their chances for survival.

The Florida Farm Bureau's opposition was a slap in the face, says Florida Panther Society president Stephen Williams, because the Farm Bureau, ironically enough, had won and spent a \$180,000 state grant it had received for a panther education program. The money came from the Environmental Education Trust Fund, a voluntary program that collects extra fees on auto license plates to support research and education programs benefiting panthers and endangered manatees. The Farm Bureau used the grant to print brochures and mount panther-protection exhibits around the state.

Bureau president Carl Loop, who is also a vice president of AFBF, says the Farm Bureau

believes agriculture can share land with panthers. “We were in favor of saving the panther, and they were looking at taking a lot of land for panther habitat,” he said in an interview. “We weren’t sure what our position should be, and we thought an education program would be the best way to do it.” Loop justifies the later decision to oppose reintroduction by the fact that northern Florida is more populated than the south. “I don’t see it as a contradiction,” he said. “We were trying to preserve them in their habitat in south Florida.”

Despite the change of heart, Loop says the education program “was a good experience for us. We got a lot of support out of Audubon and other groups and it helped to build a relationship.... We find we have a lot in common. Where there’s problems, there’s got to be a best way to solve them, to work together.” Even so, the Panther Society feels betrayed. In November, 1998, the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission said it would abandon efforts to reintroduce panthers in north Florida because of strong local landowner opposition.

ANIMAL DAMAGE CONTROL

“As wildlife numbers grow by leaps and bounds, conflicts with humans are increasing,” wrote AFBF broadcast services director Stewart Truelsen in a 1998 web posting. AFBF apparently is satisfied that “wildlife numbers are much higher than in the past” and believes that the greatest wildlife challenge today is controlling pest species.

Because of the Farm Bureau, the federal

agency responsible for killing predators on behalf of ranchers will continue operating with a fat budget. AFBF lobbyist Jon Doggett acknowledges that the Farm Bureau was instrumental in reversing a funding cut for the Department of Agriculture’s Wildlife Services (formerly called Animal Damage Control), whose agents trap and poison predators on public and private land. The House of Representatives voted in June, 1998, to cut \$10 million from the Wildlife Services appropriation. After intense lobbying by Farm Bureau representatives in several states, the House reversed its decision the next day.

In the West over the last five years, Wildlife Services has killed or trapped mountain lions, black bears, coyotes, foxes and golden eagles — a total of 90,814 predators in 1997 — even in designated federal wilderness areas, including the Santa Teresa Wilderness in Arizona and the Apache Kid Wilderness in New Mexico. Ranchers had complained that these predators attacked their calves. “You’d think if there was one place that should be predator-friendly, it would be the wilderness,” says John Horning of the conservation group Forest Guardians. “It boggles the mind that on the cusp of the 21st century we are paying federal employees to kill predators on federal land for the benefit of a handful of people.”

GRAY WOLVES AND SPOTTED OWLS

When the New Mexico Farm and Livestock Bureau and other ranching groups asked a federal court in December, 1998, to bar further releases of endangered Mexican gray wolves,

bureau attorneys argued that the wolves would take food away from spotted owls from which ranchers “derive substantial aesthetic enjoyment.” The *Albuquerque Journal* chastised the ranching groups in an editorial saying the court should consider sanctions for filing frivolous pleadings. “Crocodile tears over the fate of the spotted owl are so contrary to the track record of ranching groups as to be bereft of credibility,” the editorial said. “Ranchers and their lawyers probably enjoyed a good guffaw or two over that bit of

‘cowboy biology,’ but it should be no laughing matter to the court.” Apparently the court didn’t buy the farm bureau arguments. It dismissed the lawsuit.

Attacks such as these on wildlife protections are just one part of a comprehensive anti-environment, anti-labor agenda that the Farm Bureau continues to pursue. And as the next chapters will illustrate, when it comes to arguing its point of view, the Farm Bureau doesn’t necessarily rely on truth or scientific validity.