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Wildlife experts blast Owens

Ex-DOW officials: Business interests trump protection

By [Theo Stein Denver Post Environment Writer](#)

Former top officials in the Colorado Division of Wildlife are blasting Gov. Bill Owens' administration for what they say is a pattern of favoring businesses and groups that want to use the forests over protection of wildlife.

Critics, including a former Division of Wildlife director and a top researcher, charge that Owens' Department of Natural Resources has limited wildlife managers' ability to comment to the federal government on new national forest plans, off-road use of motorized vehicles and other development.

Perry Olson, director of the Division of Wildlife from 1988 to 1995, is one of 58 former employees who wrote Owens last week complaining that the administration has systematically degraded the DOW's ability to protect wildlife and its habitat.

"It just seems to me that the amount of political control that is exerted at the decision-making level is just being blown way out of proportion by this administration," Olson said. "And I'm a Republican, damn it."

The letter-writers said they are worried that an ongoing study of reorganization at the Department of Natural Resources will "further place the (wildlife) division under political control."

DNR director Greg Walcher dismissed the criticism. "These are the same old complaints we keep getting from the same small group of employees," he said.

Owens said he wasn't surprised by the criticism: "There are a number of things we are doing differently compared to how DNR was managed under different administrations," Owens said Monday. "Bureaucracy does not like to change. This is as natural as the sun coming up in the morning.

"They can cloak it in terms of concern over the science and micromanagement, but in a democracy, one of the reasons we have a change in government is to have a change in management."

More than a dozen current and former wildlife division employees interviewed by The Denver Post cited what they said were examples of DNR interference:

Former wildlife research leader Bruce Gill studied mule deer decline in 1999. After the study was done, Gill said, he received a call from Tim Pollard, the DNR's assistant director of wildlife and parks. Gill said Pollard tried to persuade him to

rewrite his conclusions to implicate coyotes in the mule deer deaths. At the time, groups representing hunters, outfitters and guides were pushing the state to resume killing coyotes to increase deer herds.

Pollard said the study "was going to upset the stakeholders and could I change this report and make predation a bigger part of it?" Gill said. "I told him I wouldn't because that's not the truth." Poor habitat and other factors were at least as important as coyotes, he said.

Pollard declined to comment.

Walcher has acknowledged that in 2000, he edited DOW comments on the federal government's White River National Forest Plan to omit concerns from district wildlife managers about the impact of illegal roads, logging and proposals for new ski lifts on wildlife. Walcher said that most of the division's concerns stayed in the document but that he balanced the interests of all the department's agencies.

In 2002, the DNR failed to include 20 pages of comments from wildlife biologists on a new plan to manage off-road vehicles in the White River National Forest.

The biologists urged closure of unpermitted roads. Walcher's official comments said the Forest Service should not close roads unless it could prove they were detrimental to wildlife and urged officials to allow existing unpermitted roads without further studies.

When the flap came to light last March, former Wildlife Director John Mumma said it was inappropriate for the state to so strongly favor the off-road industry.

Walcher said he never saw the biologists' comments. But his deputy director, Pollard, did, according to an environmental group that got a copy of the document from him two weeks before the comment deadline.

A DOW official ultimately took the blame for the incident, saying the document got lost on his desk.

This spring, several biologists said they cringed as Walcher lobbied the U.S. Department of the Interior to grant Colorado counties rights-of-way through large areas of undeveloped federal land for ranching and public use.

Numerous studies show off-road vehicle use harms wildlife. But agency biologists weren't consulted about the issue.

"I don't think anyone at the DOW expects to prevail every time," said former wildlife manager Gene Byrne. The biologists "just want to have their input heard," he said. "If policymakers want to disregard it or temper it, that's their prerogative. But to cut us off at the knees is inexcusable."

The wildlife employees said the DNR's track record makes them wary of the reorganization study.

Recommendations, which could include consolidating all nine natural resources divisions under one roof, are due this month.

Walcher says he hopes to save between \$15 million and \$20 million of the \$168 million natural resources budget.

But former employees predict any savings will come from drastic personnel cuts or by diverting hunting and fishing fees collected by the DOW to other divisions. The DOW receives no state money.

Eddie Kochman, the DOW's former aquatic section leader, is lobbying legislators to review the proposed reorganization.

Kochman said Walcher rebuffed his offer to have former employees contribute to the study.

The 58 people who signed the letter accumulated 1,500 years of service at the agency, he said.

Walcher said it's up to current employees to recommend efficiencies. "I don't know why former employees think they should be consulted," he said. "They don't work there anymore."

Walcher's defenders note that he recently agreed with the wildlife division about proposed natural gas drilling on the Roan plateau near Rifle.

In comments submitted to the Bureau of Land Management, Walcher adopted wildlife's recommendations against drilling on part of the plateau and for directional drilling to limit development of roads and well pads nearby.

But even some of the DOW's most prominent critics are taking the division's side.

State Sen. Jack Taylor, R-Steamboat Springs, authored an unsuccessful 1995 bill to enhance the DNR's authority over wildlife, and later backed a similar successful bill.

Now Taylor is dismayed that Walcher failed to consult the legislature about the reorganization.

"That's what really bothers me - is that this appears to be going on in a vacuum," said Taylor, a member of the Senate committee that oversees the DNR.

A sportsmen's group that regularly has criticized the wildlife agency has now turned its guns on the DNR.

"We may have disagreed with the division on many specific issues, but if you don't maintain autonomous and professional management of wildlife, if that function is to be directed by political whim, that does not bode well for the state of Colorado," said Jerry Hart, former president of the United Sportsmen's Council. The council supported the DNR on the mule deer issue.

Hart said the fact that so many former employees and wildlife commissioners signed the letter should signal that the DOW is in peril. "I think this is a major, major decision point," he said.

Environmentalists are worried, too.

The Colorado Environmental Coalition is taking a much stronger stand than the administration on the Roan Plateau, seeking to have 38,000 acres of the 73,000-acre study area declared wilderness to block any development at all.

And the wildlife agency's future is troublesome, too, said coalition spokeswoman Elise Jones.

"I think the greatest concern is this increasing trend of micromanagement and the stifling of independent scientific analysis, like on the White River National Forest Plan," Jones said. "We can't get the (wildlife) division to speak frankly about the impact of these plans on wildlife."