

Article Published: Wednesday, September 17, 2003

<http://www.denverpost.com/Stories/0,1413,36~417~1636043,00.html>

Editorial

Heed Div. of Wildlife critics

Gov. Bill Owens needs to heed the growing criticism of the Colorado Department of Natural Resources. Owens and DNR executive director Greg Walcher have dismissed the legitimate concerns about how our state manages wildlife as mere bellyaching from bureaucrats. The worries, though, involve valid points about the heavy-handed, pro-development stance DNR has pushed since Owens took office.

The latest dust-up concerns 58 former Division of Wildlife employees who wrote Owens last week, complaining that his administration has systematically degraded the DOW's ability to protect wildlife and habitat.

Instead of listening to these distinguished scientists and experienced wildlife managers, Owens and Walcher uttered cliches about bureaucrats disliking change. Obviously, the governor and DNR director can't comprehend the seriousness of the criticisms - perhaps because they have grown too distant from the people in the field and the important state missions they fulfill.

The concerns raised in the wildlife experts' letter, and many other criticisms, involve decisions Walcher has made in Owens' name dating back more than five years.

In the late 1990s, state wildlife biologists begged the U.S. Forest Service to protect wildlife habitat in the White River National Forest from development and off-road vehicle use. The Forest Service's first draft of its White River management plan thus emphasized helping wildlife. But Walcher disregarded what his own expert biologists said. Instead, he recommended that the Forest Service adopt an extremely pro-development plan that would have turned Colorado's high country into an outdoor Disneyland.

The Forest Service eventually wrote a moderate White River final plan, and again sought state input. Walcher once more deleted concerns of wildlife biologists from the state's comments.

So it looked suspicious when, in 2002, the DNR failed to send biologists' comments to the Forest Service when the feds were grappling specifically with how to manage off-road vehicles on the White River forest.

That's not all. In 1999, Walcher's deputy pressured a career wildlife biologist to say that Colorado's mule deer populations were declining because of coyote predation. The decline really was caused by poor habitat and other factors. Fortunately, the biologist had the extraordinary courage to hold his ground - or else Colorado would have implemented a policy based on politics, not science.

This year, Walcher told the U.S. Interior Department that Colorado wants to let counties build roads over federal land, even national monuments and wildlife refuges.

Now, Walcher wants to consolidate all DNR offices, including the DOW, into one building. Walcher says the move would save money, although a study on the matter isn't done. Critics fear the move is more likely to increase Walcher's ability to micromanage wildlife managers than to save tax dollars.

Gov. Owens must explain to Coloradans why the needs of our state's cherished wildlife have been shoved aside to benefit extreme off-road vehicle use, rampant development and other narrow special interests.