# OPINION

COCONINO VOICES

## SMART WEEK: Guns and children, they don't mix!

BY DAVID SPENCE

I am a pediatrician and Flagstaff City Councilmember. This appeal to the gun owners of Flagstaff stems from our City Council meeting on Aug. 25, at which Mayor Daggett proclaimed Aug. 24-28, 2026 as SMART WEEK.

Now you are asking, what is SMART WEEK? It is a nationwide initiative from Everytown for Gun Safety to reduce deaths and injury of our children from firearms. I am writing this appeal because I am so moved by the presentation and the response from our local chapter of Moms for Gun Safety. That response mentioned the tragic death, just five days prior, of a 5-year-old boy who found his father's loaded pistol under a pillow and, while playing with the gun, shot himself in the head. While such a death is unintentional, it is not "accidental"!

Let's start with some statistics. The Center for Disease Control reported the underlying causes of death for children 1-17 years of age in 2024 as follows:

- Firearms: 2,214
- Motor Vehicle Accidents: 2,119
- Cancer: 1,511
- Congenital Anomalies: 973
- Drowning: 891

Our Founding Fathers enshrined the right of people to keep and bear arms in the Second Amendment to our Constitution; however, I believe the above statistic of the leading cause of death of children would have them echoing this same appeal to keep children safe from those "arms."

How do firearms serve as the underlying cause of death? Obvious scenarios are suicides and homicides. A less obvious scenario is this research statistic from Everytown for Gun Safety: "Each year in the United States an average of 350 children under the age of 18 years gain access to a firearm and unintentionally shoot themselves or someone else." How can this senseless tragedy be prevented?

Our SMART WEEK Proclamation has this answer: "One of the most effective ways to prevent these (350) shootings is to ensure that all guns are stored securely in homes, cars and elsewhere. The gold standard for secure gun storage is to keep all guns unloaded, locked up and separate from ammunition."

With the above gold standard standard in mind, I would like to share one more statistic relative to Flagstaff: Research from Everytown for Gun Safety shows that 6,700,000 children in the U.S. live in a home where a gun is unlocked and loaded. Translating that number to Flagstaff's total population of 77,260, that gives us an estimate that 1,336 children in Flagstaff are at such risk.

Gun owners of Flagstaff; here is the appeal: keep your guns secure and out of the hands of our children. If you must have a gun in your home; secure it! A biometric gun safe is better than a padlock or combination safe, according to experts. Let's keep all our children safe from senseless gun tragedies.

Please, make every week of the year a SMART WEEK in Flagstaff!

**DAVID SPENCE, MD, IS A FLAGSTAFF CITY COUNCILMEMBER.**

ARIZONA VOICES

## Sounding the call to protect the Mexican wolves

BY SHAWN SIMPSON

On Sept. 4, President Trump signed an executive order to remove the grey wolf and the Mexican wolf subspecies from endangered species protection. This is the first stage in a much larger tragedy just waiting to happen.

The grey wolf species generally deserves stalwart defense. But as someone who has worked as a ranger for the Forest Service in Mexican wolf country, I want to focus on that issue in particular.

In the US, the Mexican gray wolf (Canis lupus baileyi) is only found in the mountains and forests of Arizona and New Mexico, primarily in what is known as the White Mountains near the Ariz.-N.M. border. There are only roughly 300 Mexican wolves alive today in the U.S. — up from the only four that were alive in the wild after reintroduction in 1998. In Mexico only around 40-50 remain.

Most Mexican wolves were exterminated from the American Southwest by the 1930s and considered functionally eradicated in the wild by the mid-1970s before receiving protection under the Endangered Species Act in

1976. Between 1977-1980 the last Mexican wolves were captured by biologists and placed into breeding programs. The progeny of those wolves are the ones now living in Arizona and New Mexico.

The tragedy of the Mexican wolf is perhaps best known through the writing of American conservationist and

U.S. Forest Service ranger Aldo Leopold. He once worked as a ranger in the White Mountains and recorded his killing of a wolf in his classic work of environmental philosophy A Sand County Almanac (1949). He writes there about reaching an old mother wolf in time to "watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes" and goes on to say how it was in that moment that he realized the government's policy at that time of killing all the wolves was wrong. He continues, "I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes, something known only to her and to the mountain. I was young then, and full of trigger-itch; I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunters' paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view."

What Leopold later discovered was that the killing of wolves led to an increase in deer populations. But the deer populations would increase so much, they would overeat all the vegetation they depended on. The result would be not enough food for the next generation of deer, and eventually the deer population would be destroyed. Nowadays, this interconnected system of ecological dependency is known as a "trophic cascade." Leopold was one of the first to identify this.

Wolves play an important role in natural ecosystems. They keep deer and elk populations healthy and in check. They tend to go after the weakest of the herds. And their presence even alters deer and elk migration patterns, thus altering the growth of plants the behavior of other wildlife. Some readers might be familiar with what happened when wolves were reintroduced to Yellowstone National Park in the mid-'90s. The famous line often repeated in that case is about how the wolves changed the rivers.

In the case of the Mexican gray wolf, this is a species that is not only important to the environment of the White Mountains, but it is a species that is culturally and spiritually significant to the Indigenous peoples who live there. The White Mountain Apache call the wolf ba'cho, and their lore reveres the wolves, treating them as teachers, guides and protectors.

The Mexican Wolf Recovery and Reintroduction Program, responsible for the present existence of the wolves, has been a decades-long collaborative effort involving multiple federal and state agencies, the White Mountain Apache, and several non-governmental organizations.

I recall while working as a ranger in the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest educating visitors and locals on the importance of the wolves. But I also remember the frustration I experienced when I'd see locals with bumper stickers that had crosshairs over a silhouette of a wolf or that read "Kill a wolf, save a deer."

Sadly, there are many people in the White Mountain region of Arizona and New Mexico today who have a disdain for the wolves and would rather see them dead. This is despite Leopold having pointed out the importance of the wolves so many years ago, and despite federal and state agencies offering 100% compensation for any livestock killed.

I can only imagine that if protections for the Mexican wolf are lifted, too many people living in those areas will see it as an opportunity to carry out their deadly wishes. I shudder thinking about how many wolves will see an unjust and untimely end.

I recall seeing my first Mexican gray wolf while working in the White Mountains. It ran across a road our crew was driving along and dashed fast back into the forest. I also recall the first time I heard a chorus howl of the wolves, one night while I was camping near Mount Baldy with a childhood friend. These experiences were special to us, life memories I'll never forget. And they are experiences I hope others, including my nephew born this year, will have the great fortune to enjoy for many generations to come.

The executive order President Trump signed on Sept. 4 does not provide immediate permission for the killing of wolves. The Interior Secretary Doug Burgum has 90 days to decide whether the grey and Mexican wolf populations should be taken off the endangered species list. Still, this is a short window for the public to voice their concerns and help prevent a repetition of the same tragedy enacted decades ago from once again coming to fruition.

The wolves were here before us. They deserve to live here still. I encourage my fellow Americans to call their senators and representatives and tell them: do not let the Mexican wolf, and the grey wolf species more generally, lose the protection of their endangered species status.

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## Let livestock help clear grasses before the next wildfire

BY BRIANA SWETTE AND KELLY HOPPING

In grasslands across the American West, four-legged fire prevention crews are busy at work, helping keep wildfire risk under control. These cattle, goats and sheep stomp down tall grasses as they munch their way through plants that could otherwise burn, lowering the risk of catastrophic fires.

When livestock are intentionally used for wildfire control like this, the practice is known as targeted grazing. And it's gaining attention as severe wildfire seasons push firefighters and public land budgets to the brink.

Strategically removing trees, shrubs and grasses can help alter the trajectory of future wildfires, but it is complex and expensive work that often involves intentional burning, herbicides and heavy machinery to thin forests or create fuel breaks.

Livestock can do some of this work instead, simply by grazing in the right places.

Current leaders of the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management are pushing for more targeted grazing in national forests and on other public lands as part of the 2025 Grazing Action Plan and its accompanying directives.

As rangeland scientists who study how to effectively use livestock grazing to manage wildfire fuels and invasive plants, we see potential but also limitations to this strategy.

Targeted pyrograzing can help manage wildfire risk well in certain contexts.

Most wildfires burn in grass and shrublands that livestock can help maintain. Beef cattle, for example, consumed about 600 pounds of vegetation per acre across nearly 34 million acres in California alone in 2017. In places such as Santa Clara County, grazing is now a formal part of wildfire management plans.

The goal is not necessarily to prevent wildfire altogether but to reduce flammable vegetation enough to avoid fueling catastrophic wildfires.

Removing hazardous fuels through livestock grazing and trampling can help slow a fire's spread so firefighters can stop the fire before it enters communities or reduce its intensity so ecosystems are able to rebound afterward.

In some cases, grazing can be more practical or cost-effective than other fire risk reduction methods.

For example, intentional burning is dangerous where there is so much vegetation that fires would burn too hot and fast to control. In other places, it isn't feasible to spray herbicides across large areas or bring in heavy equipment to clear vegetation in remote locations.

But goats, sheep and cattle can eat their way across remote or steep terrain with little trouble.

We've spoken with savvy land managers who are also using livestock grazing to remove vegetation before carrying out intentional burns to make conditions safer for those fires. We've heard from others who are planning to use grazing before spraying herbicide to treat flammable invasive grasses to make it more effective.

A quarter of the U.S. Forest Service's ranger districts in the Pacific Northwest, Intermountain and Pacific Southwest have used some kind of targeted grazing to manage fire risk. When we surveyed more than 1,000 U.S. Forest Service staff members, we found a majority think targeted grazing can be at least moderately effective to help with wildfire risk management, and more than two-thirds rated past projects as moderately to extremely effective.

Using targeted grazing at the scale needed to address widespread wildfire risk across federal lands would be difficult, and it won't work everywhere.

To effectively reduce wildfire fuel with grazing, ranchers often need to bring livestock to certain areas at different times of year, haul water so livestock can work in areas without natural water sources or keep livestock in areas for longer than would be ideal for their weight gain.

Those factors cost ranchers money and can require shifts in their operation that aren't practical. Or in certain contexts, animals simply may be unable to graze enough to achieve the desired reduction in wildfire risk.

Just 5% of Forest Service staff in the survey we conducted in 2025 reported that they were very likely or extremely likely to use targeted grazing in the next few years. Their answers were driven by how effective they believed targeted grazing could be, but also whether they felt they would have time to plan and manage it.

In particular, we found they were concerned about a lack of monitoring to ensure projects have the intended effect. Their ratings were also strongly connected to whether they felt that ranchers who already graze livestock on public lands could actually implement targeted grazing. And very few staff thought it would be feasible for the agency to pay ranchers to conduct targeted grazing as a vegetation treatment.

As the Grazing Action Plan pushes federal agencies to expand the use of targeted grazing, work is underway to evaluate where it could be effective. Some uncertainties remain, including around the question of paying ranchers and herders to perform targeted grazing as the practice scales up. Environmental groups have sued over the plan, arguing that it would put wildlife at risk and is simply an excuse to open more land for ranchers.

Although grazing is not appropriate everywhere, our research finds good examples of U.S. Forest Service staff incorporating livestock grazing into fire and fuels planning.

In Idaho, we are working with ranchers to test using sheep to reduce highly flammable and invasive grasses. In some years, the sheep have reduced the amount of flammable invasive grass by more than 20% and even boosted the cover of native wildflowers. Other times, the invasive grass matures so early that it is difficult to get the sheep to the target areas at the right time.

We have documented the value when ranchers, herders, agency staff and scientists work together toward shared environmental goals. The U.S. would benefit from financial and technical investment in both agency staff and ranchers to plan and perform targeted grazing so the practice can become a tried-and-true part of America's strategy to live with wildfire.

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