

Wolf return stirs up strong opinions



Rock Creek runs through the property of a rancher in Spokane. Because all known wolf packs in Eastern Washington are located north of Spokane, ranchers have not yet had to implement the nonlethal measures outlined in the Wolf Conservation and Management Plan for Washington.

As the number of wolves rises in Wash., compromise is crucial to their survival

By Jessica Krueger

The numbers are in and the annual status report released by the Department of Fish and Wildlife on state endangered species reveals that four new packs of gray wolves have established their territory in Washington.

According to the Washington Gray Wolf Conservation and Management 2013 Annual Report, the number of wolves in the state is at least 52 wolves in 13 known packs. Three of the four new packs are located in Eastern Washington and the remaining one in the northern Cascades.

The growth has not come without controversy, however.

"We don't love one endangered species more than any other," Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife Public Information Officer Madonna Luers said. "But this one, more so than any other, has elicited very strong opinions."

The top challenges, according to Luers, have been minimizing wolf predation on livestock, working to shift the attitude people have towards wolves and managing the natural restoration of wolves under the close watch of impassioned conservationists.

"One thing we always say, our mantra, is that wolves only need two things," Luers said. "Wolves can live virtually anywhere they have a prey base. The second thing they need is human tolerance. Without that we are not going to be able to retain wolf populations."

Derrick Knowles, Conservation Northwest conservation associate, said collaboration and working together is the preferred approach.

"Wolves bring out a lot of different passions from all different angles, more than any natural species I've ever been involved in," Knowles said. "[But] the extreme views are never going to get their way, so compromise is key in coming to a real, lasting solution."

According to the annual report, the gray wolf is native to the regions within Washington state borders. As defined in the Wolf Conservation and Management Plan, Washington finds any wildlife species present before the arrival of Euro-Americans to be native to the state.

Their numbers began to decline in Washington in the late 1800s as the number of human settlers increased. It is believed that by the 1930s, wolves were eradicated from Washington due to the high price for hides; bounties; and government-sponsored predator control programs.

With the number gray of wolves drastically falling, they were placed under the protection of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) in 1973.

After years of irregular reports, the number of sightings largely increased during the 1990s and early 2000s; however, there were no resident packs documented during this time.

The first resident pack since the 1930s was documented in 2008 in Okanogan County in north-central Washington.

"They are walking in and re-establishing their spot as a native species," Luers said. "They are a native species. They are returning on their own."

Since then, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) initiated the development of the Wolf Conservation and Management Plan for Washington, which after five years of work was adopted in December 2011.

"The recovery of wolves [in Washington] is set up very similar to how the Northern Rockies was set up," Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife Biologist Scott Becker said.

It might even be a little more aggressive according to Inland Northwest Wildlife Council Second Vice President Kayla Haas.

"Washington's plan to me seems more aggressive, and a little more specific when it comes to certain issues and that's because of what we've learned from Yellowstone, Idaho and Montana," Haas said.

The main recovery goals of the plan include a goal for delisting wolves. It requires 15 wolf-breeding pairs to be present in the state for at least three years. Of these 15 pairs, a set of four has to be present in each of the three defined recovery areas in Washington: Eastern Washington, the northern Cascades and the southern Cascades. The remaining three pairs can be found anywhere in the state.

There are some people who do not like the plan, however.

"Right now we don't have any wolf packs, or documented wolf packs in one of the recovery areas," Becker said. "There are some folks who don't like the way it's set up because they feel [that] the burden of the wolves coming back is felt more in one area of the state than any other."

According to the annual report, as of Dec. 31, 2013, 10 of the known packs are located in the Eastern Washington recovery area and three in the northern Cascades.

The plan also allows for the downlisting of wolves if specific criteria are met. Downlisting would move the wolves from endangered to threatened, and from threatened to sensitive. At which point the gray wolf can be completely delisted from the state endangered list and classified as a game species. This is only possible if requirements laid out in the plan are met, or when there are at least four successful breeding pairs in each recovery area plus an additional six breeding pairs anywhere in the state for a single year.

Even if the measures outlined in the plan are met, Luers said she believes there will still be some regulations in place to protect wolves.

"The fact of the matter is, when we do get to a sustainable population of wolves, there will be some kind of control put into place in order to coexist with them," Luers said.

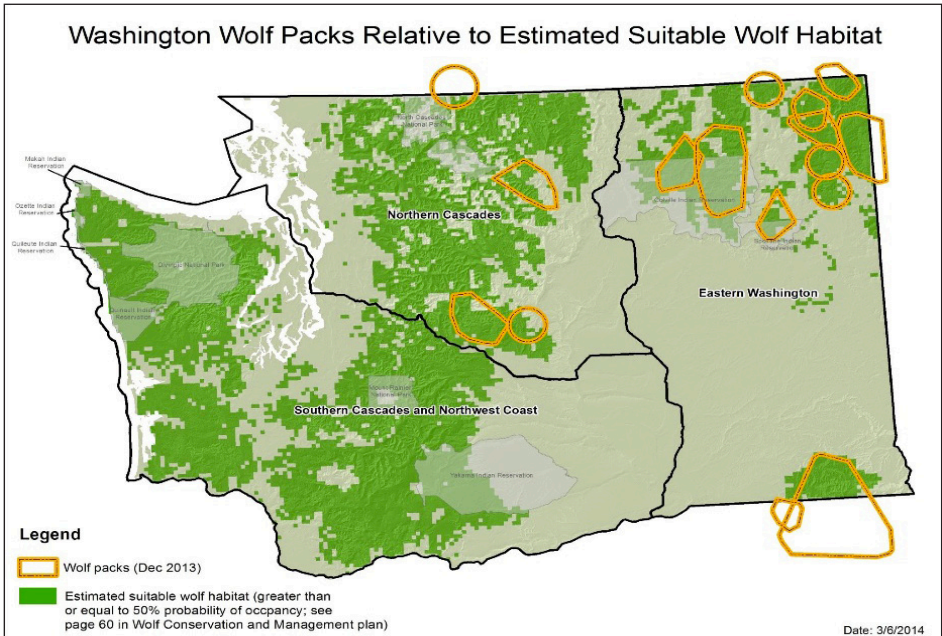
Even with the current regulations, a lot is being done for the anti-wolf supporters, perhaps more so than for proponents of stronger protections, Becker said.

"We've developed a lot of nonlethal techniques that we encourage livestock producers to use," he said. "It makes the producers happy and the pro-wolf people happy."

These nonlethal techniques are included the plan to respond to wolves that prey on livestock. In 2013, according to the annual report, the nonlethal and preventive measures used included fladry and electrified fladry, RAG boxes, hazing wolves from livestock, increased operator presence around wolves, range riders, providing wolf location data to livestock producers and range riders and the removal of injured or dead livestock from grazing sites.

Range riders are hired to move cattle when the Department of Fish and Wildlife relays the location of wolves to them using GPS capabilities in the radio collars, Luers said. Radio collar signals can also be used to activate RAG boxes, which set off loud sounds and lights to scare wolves away from livestock enclosures. Fladry is red cloth used to stream red cloth from a fence line, usually surrounding where the younger animals are kept.

In 2011, Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell was directed by a portion of the federal budget bill to reissue the final delisting rule for gray wolves in the Northern Rocky



From top: Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife researchers collect data on a yearling female captured near Ruby Creek on July 15, 2013. A map depicting known wolf packs in Washington relative to habitat deemed suitable for wolves by the WDFW.

Important Terms as Defined by the State of Washington

- **Endangered:** any wildlife species that is native to Washington and is seriously threatened by extinction throughout or in a significant amount of the state.
- **Pack of wolves:** a group of wolves, which usually includes a male, female and their offspring from one or more generations.
- **Successful breeding pair:** an adult male and female pair of wolves that have a minimum of two surviving pups by Dec. 31 of a given year.
- **Viable population:** a population that does not require a significant amount of human conservation efforts to maintain its size, distribution and genetic variation over time.

Mountains Distinct Population Segment. Wolves in the eastern third of Washington were withdrawn from federal protection under the ESA.

Under Washington state law, however, wolves are still classified as an endangered species and efforts to re-establish gray wolves in the region are presently in effect. In addition, gray wolves found in the western two-thirds of the state remain protected under the ESA and classified as endangered under federal law.

"Basically federal regulations trump all state regulations," Becker said. "We have to consult with the official wildlife service all the time to make sure what we do management-wise has the same goals as [them]."

For instance, he said a provision of the plan allows the WDFW to issue a Caught-in-the-Act permit to livestock producers to kill wolves who are caught in the act of attacking livestock. Because of federal regulations, however, these permits can only be issued in the eastern one-third of the state.

According to the annual report, no Caught-in-the-Act permits were issued to livestock producers in 2013. Five wolves did die in Washington in 2013, however. One death was due to natural causes, one was legally harvested and three were human-caused.

"It comes back to they're coming back," Luers said. "They're coming back on their own. To give you an example of what it's like: grizzly bears, we used to have more of them. They are a state endangered species and a federally threatened species. There used to be more of them, but there are protections in place where you can't just shoot a grizzly bear. We're dealing with population growth as it comes [and] as the laws set in place allow the species to recover on their own."

Wolf research is a relatively new facet of the Department of Fish and Wildlife and will take time to build up, according to Haas.

"Because this is such a new issue and it takes time to build up that science, we are still in the early research stages ourselves," she said.