

State's wolf population increasing

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By COOPER INVEEN WNPA Olympia News Bureau | [0 comments](#)

For the first time in generations, wolf populations are on the rise in Washington.

In 2008 a Conservation Northwest volunteer captured the first images of wolves born in the state since the early 1900s. Since then their numbers have more than quintupled.

“In terms of what we’ve seen in the Rocky Mountain states — Idaho, Montana and Wyoming — we’re at kind of a threshold number in terms of what we’ve seen in prior years,” said Dave Ware, wolf policy lead administrator at the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife.

In those cases, wolf populations increased exponentially once they crossed the 50-wolf mark. Today, the department has confirmed at least 52 wolves living in Washington, mostly living in the northeastern part of the state. At the rate they’re currently breeding, the agency anticipates wolves could reach state recovery objectives as early as 2021.

Ware presented the findings to a joint House and Senate committee in mid-January. He acknowledged concern about the increasing numbers by some.

“Twenty percent of wolf packs end up causing a depredation at some point,” Ware told lawmakers. “Certainly that number varies significantly, or can from one year to the next. But that can have significant impacts on individual ranchers.”

The first recorded wolf attack on livestock occurred in 2007, before any wolves had been officially reported living in the state. Since then, Ware says wolf depredations have been fairly limited, although increases

County: once in 2012 when 16 cows were attacked, and again in 2014 when 30 sheep were confirmed to have been attacked or killed by a local wolf pack.

When it comes to attacks on livestock, the agency focuses most of its efforts on prevention. This means helping landowners procure guard dogs and electric fences, as well as sending out range-riders — horsemen dedicated to keeping herds moving, removing animal carcasses from wolf-heavy areas and keeping their eyes out for any signs of wolf activity.

To date the WDFW has worked with more than 40 landowners to help maintain wolf populations, and issuing compensation in some cases. The agency notes that preventative measures only go so far, and after multiple attacks are attributed to a single pack, its officers have no choice but to take lethal action, Ware explained.

Eight wolves have been put down by state officers in the past three years, approximately one-sixth of their minimum population. In the Rocky Mountain states, 15 percent of wolf deaths were attributed to humans before recovery goals were reached. In Washington, that figure is less than 7 percent.

A wolf from the Teanaway pack was found shot in late October north of Lake Cle Elum.

The department recently conducted a public survey that showed strong support for wolf recovery, along with an equally strong support for killing wolves that repeatedly attack livestock. The survey showed that 64 percent support wolf-reintroduction efforts, yet 63 percent are in favor of using lethal force to protect livestock.

Support of lethal force is as high as 68 percent in Eastern Washington, where wolves and ranching are the most prevalent. It's lowest — 56 percent — in the state's five most populous counties, where no wolves have been recorded.

"The most support in the state for wolf recovery is in areas where there are no wolves," Rep. Joel Kretz, R-Wauconda, said to the committee.

Kretz expressed concern that a lack of coordination between the state, local and tribal governments is leading to poor management decisions, citing an instance where approximately 1,800 sheep were placed near a wolf-breeding site by mistake.

"If we don't resolve this," he said, "things are just going to become even more polarized and you'll never have wolf acceptance in my part of the state."

Since 2008, support for wolf reintroduction has been on the rise and opposition has been in decline. Ware remains optimistic and concedes that given the controversial nature of the issue, support will never reach 100 percent.