
Column: Wolf hate on the rise in the West, with ranchers often in driver's seat

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The wolf issue continues to heat up across the West, with states like Oregon, Idaho, Montana, and now Colorado, all getting a chance to show their preferred flavor of wolf management.

Here in “progressive” Oregon, wolves are continuously being slaughtered by the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, often with the help of the U.S. Department of Agriculture Wildlife Services. This state-sponsored killing (plus private poaching) has resulted in suppressed wolf numbers and a hampered recovery effort.

Oregon finished 2022 with only an estimated three individuals added to the state’s meager wolf population on top of the 2021 census. As of the end of 2022, Oregon stands at a minimum count of 178 individual wolves. For context, a study by Dr. Bill Ripple of Oregon State University estimated that Oregon can naturally support a population of around 1,500 individuals.

Wolf-hate has been on the rise across the West. Let's consider Idaho where the climate has been extremely hostile particularly since 2011 when wolves were removed from the endangered species list and returned to state management. Beginning that year, and following every year since, first USDA Wildlife Services and then the Idaho Department of Fish and Game has killed wolves to boost elk numbers – even while Idaho's department has been culling elk for crop depredations and sport harvests are at record highs. Escalating in 2021, Idaho passed a law allowing the killing of up to 90% of the state's wolves, enabling hunters to use methods like night-vision equipment and snowmobiles. The state's Wolf Depredation Control Board has funneled bounty payments to private trappers who kill wolves and recently approved paying a private contractor to gun down wolves from the air. In just three years, since 2021 with expanded hunting and trapping seasons, about 1,000 wolves have been killed in the state.

Like in Idaho, Oregon ranchers are in the driver's seat when it comes to wolf management in the state, despite claims to the contrary. Disproportionate livestock industry influence over ODFW in Salem is too obvious to ignore, from the overzealous issuance of wolf kill permits to expanding mismanaged wolf-livestock compensation funds that make questionable payments to ranchers. A current effort underway seeks to compensate ranchers for "probable" livestock losses at 700% of the value per head. This would only incentivize false reporting.

Forest Service land in Oregon is the best available habitat we have to properly recover wolves in the state. There are only 285 livestock permittees who run cattle on U.S. Forest Service land on 411 allotments spanning 7,290,140 acres. This group represents just .00007% of Oregon's population, but their private businesses impact an area equaling four Yellowstone National Parks. If not for these few ecologically harmful livestock operations, wolves would actually have a chance at recovery. As an example, livestock displace wolves' natural prey (elk and deer) and eat their forage; forcing them onto private lands where the wolves follow. Such a small constituency cannot be allowed to dictate what happens to our public wildlife and management of our public lands when the majority of Oregonians want wolves to be recovered.

On December 14, the state Wildlife Commission opted not to "open up" the Wolf and Conservation Management Plan to revision in the spirit of "working together," and instead, voiced their desire to make the current plan somehow current through "adaptive management." In doing so, the Department is tossing aside a growing body of science that suggests lethal management is counterproductive when the goal is to maintain viable wolf populations and protect livestock. In short, more wolves killed destabilizes packs leading to more livestock conflicts. The failure to update the Wolf Plan with the latest science sends the message loud and clear that cows and sheep, not native wildlife, still rule the roost at Fish and Game.

In order to achieve natural carrying capacities for wolves, the state government of Oregon must first reach social carrying capacity. Reforms are desperately needed at the federal and state level. For instance, the U.S. Forest Service must begin properly managing habitat and state Fish and Wildlife must stop killing wolves because it is scientifically indefensible. As long as livestock interests control the state wildlife commission, change will not come soon enough.

