

Oregon wolves expected to spread west and south

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State biologists say Oregon's gray wolf population may have reached its ecological limit in the eastern third of the state and that packs will probably spread out to the west and south in greater numbers.

Those comments, made at a meeting of the state Fish and Wildlife Commission, came as Colorado released five wolves trapped from Oregon as part of a historic reintroduction program.

Roblyn Brown, the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife's wolf coordinator, told ranchers and conservationists last week that about 200 gray wolves in nearly 25 packs call Oregon home. She said their numbers have leveled off in recent years because most wolves live in northeast Oregon, an area that's becoming crowded for the species. Wolves first recolonized their native habitat there in 2009 after hunting and harassment eradicated them from Oregon for 50 years.

The wildlife agency counted 178 wolves in the state in 2022, up from 175 in 2021 and 173 in 2020, though officials say that's an undercount. Their numbers have plateaued in recent years after spiking for a decade.

Wolves packs have taken root in central and southwestern Oregon, including a pack in Jackson County that has become notorious for preying on cattle.

“We’re going to start seeing a lot more wolves over the next few years in other areas of Oregon,” Brown said.

But conservationists are concerned that the agency is killing more wolves as packs prey more and more on livestock.

Illegal kills also continue to plague wolf packs. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is offering a \$26,500 reward for information leading to convictions for two separate wolf slayings in November, including one in Jackson County. Wolf hunting is illegal in Oregon, and the Jackson County wolf was protected under the federal Endangered Species Act, like all others in central and western Oregon.

In the Fish and Wildlife Commission meeting, Brown said nonetheless that a sustained wolf population is “a big accomplishment.”

She said that almost 90% of adult wolves survived year-to-year in Oregon – a higher rate than other Western states such as Idaho and Montana that authorize wolf hunts en masse. Both states have much higher numbers of wolves than Oregon.

Derek Broman, the agency’s game program manager, said that some environmental challenges expected to plague Oregon wolves haven’t been issues after all. Conservationists had been concerned about a lack of genetic diversity among different wolf packs, which could make wolves more susceptible to canine diseases and disruptions in their environment.

“Some of those conservation threats are not what they were five years ago,” Broman said.

John Williams of the Oregon Cattlemen’s Association said that trust is growing between ranchers and wildlife managers thanks to a more efficient process of investigating kills of livestock – which remain a source of concern for a small group of ranchers who have lost cattle, sheep and goats. The agency is also streamlining its process for approving the killing of predatory wolves, he said.

“We’re encouraged by the direction,” he told the commission.

The Oregon Legislature this year also released \$1 million more to compensate ranchers for livestock losses, more than in any year since lawmakers created the state program in 2011, according to Capital Press.

Plan stays the same

After hearing from wildlife officials, ranchers, hunters and conservationists, the commission decided not to reform the state’s wolf management plan, a hard-fought set of rules and regulations that took four years to hammer out due to disagreements about state-approved wolf kills and attacks on livestock.

Instances of both are on the rise. Investigators confirmed that wolves killed 76 privately-owned livestock last year, compared to 16 in 2019.

The agency authorized the killing of 16 wolves so far this year, according to agency data compiled by the Western Environmental Law Center, a conservation advocacy group. That's up from an average of less than four wolves each year from 2019 to 2022. The agency killed six gray wolves in six weeks this summer, to the anger of conservationists.

Sristi Kamal, deputy director of the Western Environmental Law Center, said the wildlife agency is over-relying on legal wolf killings to protect livestock.

"They are now choosing very heavily to engage in lethal," she said.

Holly Tuers-Lance, a state wolf biologist, said during the meeting that preying on livestock is a learned skill for some wolves and that two-thirds of wolf packs in Oregon aren't known to do so.

According to the agency's data, just eight livestock producers experienced half of all known livestock predictions. She said that data helps wolf managers be deliberate about where to reduce conflict between wolves and communities.

Fish and wildlife officials say they only authorize the killing of a wolf when a rancher can document at least two incidents of livestock predation within nine months, and after other methods have failed to deter wolves, such as building fencing, enlisting livestock dogs or guarding cattle.

Plus, wolves are off-limits for lethal removal in most of the state because packs outside eastern Oregon are protected by the federal Endangered Species Act.

Tuers-Lance said the federal law is hamstringing the agency's efforts to protect livestock from the Rogue wolf pack in southern Oregon, which has preyed on livestock more than 60 times from 2016 to 2022, according to agency data.

She said experiments with non-lethal deterrents and new technology haven't worked, and ranchers are spending "unsustainable amounts of time trying to prevent conflict."