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Groups meet in Ellensburg to discuss wolves in Washington

By MIKE JOHNSTON senior writer
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Several local outdoors enthusiasts have shared by email this digital photo of what appears to be a wolf in the Liberty area off U.S. Highway 97 taken March 12 by a motion-triggered trail camera set up by a local hunter. Identification of the hunter hasn't been confirmed. (contributed)

Contributed

ELLENSBURG — Retired state wildlife agent Bill Essman spent 25 of his 28 years working in Kittitas County, and he can't remember a year of work without getting some kind of a report about someone sighting wolves.

That's wolves in Kittitas County.

"We've had wolves here for many years, as far as I can tell," said Essman, who lives in the rural Ellensburg area."

"Each year I'd get word of someone seeing what clearly was a wolf. These were very credible people I'm talking about sharing some very credible sightings," said Essman.

Most of the reports involved areas in the high country of the Alpine Lakes Wilderness, about 40 miles northwest of Ellensburg.

Essman, a Kittitas County Field and Stream Club Board member, earlier this week said he speaks for himself in maintaining that the existing wolves in the state will reproduce adequately on their own, without longterm species protection.

"And we certainly don't need to bring in any wolves into this area to increase the population," Essman said.

Sightings

He said in 1999 a U.S. Forest Service trail camera and scratching post was set up in the Gold Creek area about 50 miles northwest of Ellensburg near the boundary of the wilderness area.

The post has an attractant, and some animals like to rub up against it.

He said the camera got a photo of two wolves, and hair left on the post was later confirmed to be from a wolf.

In 2000 in the Mill Gulch area west of Blewett Pass, another sighting was reported.

He heard that several elk hunters in November 2010, in separate reports, indicated they saw what appeared to be a pack of about seven wolves in the Lion Rock area, about 15 miles north of Ellensburg.

A trail camera on March 12, 2011, caught a photo of what appeared to be a wolf in the Liberty area, 25 miles from Ellensburg.

The photo has made the rounds to local outdoor enthusiasts by email.

The most recent report Essman has heard about involves three wolves in mid-May trying to get at a pet dog hiding under a backdoor deck at a home near the mouth of the Teanaway River northeast of Cle Elum.

"What I heard was that the owner heard a big commotion out his back door and, when he saw the wolves, hollered and waved and they took off," Essman said.

Local stance

Lee Davis, president of the Kittitas County Field and Stream Club, said the club's official position on recovery and management of wolves has been forwarded to the state Department of Fish and Wildlife and its wolf working group, which met Wednesday and Thursday in Ellensburg.

The club's stance is that requiring confirmation of 15 breeding pairs of wolves in the state before the government considers lowering federal protection is "way too many pairs," Davis said.

Although the club doesn't recommend a specific number, Davis said his personal opinion is documenting six to nine pairs would be more than adequate.

"It could take years to confirm 15 or more pairs, and in that time they could produce a large number of wolves throughout the state," Davis said. "They would greatly upset the wildlife ecosystem we have and just decimate elk and deer" and create constant problems with livestock and pets, he said.

He pondered aloud what would happen in the winter at the state's elk feeding areas in Joe Watt and Robinson canyons if a wolf pack entered the area.

"Can you imagine? It would be devastating," he said.

Cattlemen want cap on number of wolves

ELLENSBURG (AP) - Cattlemen and hunting groups contend a proposed plan for managing and restoring gray wolves in Washington state still allows for too many wolves. Conservationists say landowners shouldn't be allowed to kill a wolf caught attacking a domestic dog.

Those arguments were among the biggest wrinkles Thursday in a citizen advisory group's attempts to agree on recommendations for a plan, nearly five years in the making, on how best to recover wolves in their historic territory and ultimately delist them from endangered species protections while reducing and managing wolf-livestock conflicts.

In the end, the 17 members couldn't completely agree on recommendations to the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, which released the revised plan late last month. A final plan is expected to be released for public comment in August.

The majority of the group's members agreed on most aspects of the plan. But just as they did with an earlier draft, representatives of cattle ranchers and sportsmen groups expect to submit a minority opinion.

"That's often the nature of wildlife management, especially something as controversial as wolf introduction," said Nate Pamplin, assistant director of wildlife programs for the state agency.

Gray wolves were eliminated as a breeding species in Washington by the 1930s. Statewide, they are listed as an endangered species under state law, and gray wolves are endangered under federal law in the western two-thirds of the state.

Wolves have never been reintroduced to Washington but numerous sightings over the years suggested that the animals had crossed its border from neighboring states and British Columbia. Today, there are an estimated 25 wolves residing in Washington and three confirmed resident wolf packs - one in Okanogan County and two in northeast Washington's Pend Oreille County. Additional packs may exist in central and eastern Washington.

The difficulties of wolf recovery were highlighted Wednesday with word that a Methow Valley ranching family has been indicted on charges of killing members of the Lookout Pack, the state's first documented wolf pack in decades.

Under the revised plan released by the state Department of Fish and Wildlife last month, 15 breeding pairs would be required for delisting, with an added requirement that the population remain steady for at least three years. Wildlife officials say that would equate to an overall population of between 97-361 wolves.

In at times heated discussion, the group that included representatives of farming, ranching, conservation and hunting groups, disputed how many wolves should constitute recovery of the species.

"I know there are people who aren't happy with the numbers. I'm going to respect that opinion," said Jasmine Minbashian of Conservation Northwest.

But, she added in conclusion, "If the numbers go below 15 breeding pairs, this plan won't have public support and it's going to fall apart. Maybe that's what some people want, but I don't think that's a good option for the state and for the overall goal of delisting and recovery."

Jack Field, executive director of the Washington Cattlemen Association, said the three-year waiting period to delist opens the door for the population to explode without adequate management of the species. For that reason, he said, the number of overall wolves in Washington should be capped and greater emphasis placed on management.

He also said he was discouraged that the state agency is unwilling to reduce the number of breeding pairs.

"In the cattlemen community, there is little or no support for the plan as written," he said. "This isn't about 25 wolves today. It's about 15 years down the road and the problems we will have then."

Jeff Dawson, a Stevens County rancher, said the pain of wolf reintroduction is borne by a few: livestock producers.

"Those are the folks I represent. As this plan stands, I can't support it," he said.

Ken Oliver, a former Pend Oreille County commissioner whose home sits 34 miles from the Idaho border, echoed that point.

"There are wolves just across the border in Idaho coming over and feeding on our side of the state, and you don't take that into consideration. It frustrates the devil out of me," he said. "Don't wait until there's all these wolves in Washington before you do something."

Duane Cocking of Safari Club, a sportsmen group, also raised concerns that the number of deer and elk needed to feed wolves in Eastern Washington is inadequate for the number of wolves called for there.

Under the plan, six breeding pairs would be required in Eastern Washington, four in the North Cascades and five in the South Cascades or Northwest Coast, namely the Olympic Peninsula.

"We just flat don't have the room for the number of breeding pairs or the number of packs that you folks would like to have over there," he said.

Conservation groups, meanwhile, said they could live with a provision in the revised plan to allow landowners to kill wolves caught in the act of killing livestock if a permit is required. But they disagree with a provision that allows landowners to kill wolves caught in the act of killing domestic dogs.

Extending the provision to dogs is unnecessary because wolf-dog conflicts in the Rocky Mountains have generally occurred when owners weren't around, said George Halekas, a retired U.S. Forest Service biologist.

John Stuhlmiller of the Washington Farm Bureau countered that the provision might only be used once in 50 years but provides landowners with peace of mind.

"It's 90 percent mental and it builds public acceptance," he said. "Fear of the unknown is a tremendous detriment to the success of that plan."

Everyone expects that the plan will change over time, said Arthur Swannack, past president of the Washington Sheep Producers and part of the majority supporting it, "but it's more important to have a plan that can be changed than to not have one."