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Wolf talk held at CWU to discuss populations in Washington

By NICOLE KLAUSS staff writer
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Wolves and their place in Washington were debated by some of the state's experts Thursday night.

The discussion, sponsored by Central Washington University's Museum of Culture and Environment, was part of the museum's "Wolves in Washington State" exhibit.

Panel speakers included Scott Becker, a wolf biologist with the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife in Wenatchee; Lee Davis, a local hunter and past president of Kittitas County Field and Stream; Jay Kehne, an outreach associate with the nonprofit wildlife advocacy group Conservation Northwest; and Sam Kayser, Ellensburg rancher and president of the Kittitas County Cattlemen's Association.

The discussion centered around how many wolves should be allowed in Washington, how they'll affect the environment, and if they should be hunted.

Wolf numbers

Kehne said the state's management plan, adopted by the Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission in December 2011, calls for 15 breeding pairs of wolves.

"That's a tough thing to say that's the number we'll be at," Kehne said. "We don't know how big the packs will be or how big the territories will be."

State biologists confirmed the existence of a wolf pack in the Teanaway in 2011. Four adult wolves were captured on motion sensor cameras.

Becker, with the Fish and Wildlife, expects the state's wolf population to fluctuate over time based on human conflict.

The state has different ways to handle conflict from nonlethal measures to lethal options.

"The wolves will tell us how many actually end up living in the state," Becker said. "We'll manage populations based on conflict from there."

Livestock concerns

The reappearance of wolves has caused concern for ranchers like Sam Kayser, who grazes cattle in the Teanaway. His cattle haven't been attacked by wolves, but he suspects they have been stopped by the animals. Two years ago, the cows strayed far from their normal grounds.

"I really feel we need population control ... we have less habitat than other states, but we're going to have more breeding pairs than other states," Kayser said.

To protect his cattle, Kayser has been working with Conservation Northwest's range rider program, which puts a human presence where wolves and livestock overlap, such as in large acres of the Teanaway. So far, it's been working.

"If we put a human presence out on a regular basis, it disrupts wolf predation patterns from occurring," Kehne said.

In Kehne's experience, having people in the area prevents wolves from testing the livestock. It also allows the cows to move more effectively, helping them keep weight on.

The state's management plan establishes conditions to compensate ranchers who lose livestock to wolves.

Hunting

Local hunter Lee Davis expressed his concern that wolf populations could get out of control if they are unmanaged. Hunting is a method to help maintain that control, as well as maintain control of other wildlife populations affected by wolves.

Davis said the Kittitas County Field and Stream Club has encouraged the Fish and Wildlife department to lower the number of wolves to eight breeding pairs and make them a huntable species.

"They need to be hunted like all wildlife," Davis said. "We need to keep a balance in the ecosystem."

The Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission is considering what hunting regulations for wolves would look like.

"We've got to be ready to move," said Kehne, who is a commissioner. "I think a scientifically approached hunt is what we're after. It's not just about killing wolves, it's about managing populations, and we might be able to do that better than other states."

To view a map of wolf observations in the state, visit the WDFW website at http://wdfw.wa.gov/conservation/gray_wolf/reporting/sightings.html.

Wolves exhibit

The traveling "Wolves in Washington State" exhibit from the Burke Museum in Seattle, will remain on display at Central Washington University through April 13.

The exhibit is on display at the Central Washington University's Museum of Culture and Environment.

The museum is on the first floor of Dean Hall at CWU, and is open Wednesday through Friday from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. and Saturday from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. For more information, contact the museum at 509-963-2313.