

# Hunting 'problem wolves' in Oregon

By Zach Urness  
Statesman Journal

SALEM (AP) — Oregon wildlife officials have long maintained that no hunting season is planned for the state's wolf population, even as the number of wolves in state continues to grow.

Wolf hunting is legal in nearby Idaho and Montana — and around 400 animals are harvested annually between the two states — but officials have said no similar plan is envisioned for Oregon.

Environmental groups disagree, and say the state is planning to offer wolf hunting in Oregon, and possibly soon, just by a different name.

A proposal that could allow the public to hunt "problem wolves" — animals that attack livestock or cause a major decline in game populations — has become a flashpoint in negotiations over revisions to Oregon's wolf plan.

The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife said in reports that it's only considering a more cost-effective management tool for wolves.

"This isn't sport hunting because we're not going to have a season — we're not looking to create an opportunity," ODFW spokeswoman Michelle Dennehy said. "This would be a 'controlled take' intended to address damage in very specific circumstances."

Hunting and ranching groups support special permits allowing the hunts, pointing out that the animals in question would otherwise be killed by state officials.

But environmental groups strongly oppose any public hunting of the state's roughly 150 wolves.

"Regardless of how it is framed, the hunting proposed will result in annual wolf killing — the very reason this species was wiped out from the Lower 48," said Nick Cady, conservation director for the environmental group Cascadia Wildlands.

The proposal is one of 10 being considered during revisions to the wolf plan, a process that occurs every five years. The proposals will go before the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission during a meeting on April 21 in Klamath Falls.

The confusion — and disagreement — boils down to how you define hunting.

When wolves in northeast Oregon repeatedly attack livestock, the state is currently empowered to take lethal action. In March of 2016, for example, state officials killed four wolves in the Imnaha Pack.

In the proposed revision, ODFW is considering allowing members of the public — defined as licensed hunters and trappers — to kill the wolves instead of state officials. The move would save the department time and money, a state report says.

"Currently, a large expenditure of personnel and financial resources is involved," the report says. "It follows that the future use of hunters and trappers ... would be expected to assist."

The hunting would only apply to wolves in the eastern third of Oregon after they reach Phase 3 of the wolf plan — seven breeding pairs for three consecutive years. That could happen as early as 2017, but given the small wolf population, and the fact that any use of public hunters would need to be approved by the ODFW Commission, it may not happen very quickly, officials said.

Jim Akenson, conservation director for the Oregon Hunters Association, said he supports a highly regulated permit system being implemented.

"Right now, a wolf biologist goes out and shoots the wolves when there's a problem," Akenson said. "Why not utilize the situation in a manner that provides a hunting opportunity, while also serving a management need?"

Environmentalists worry

that issuing a special permit to hunt wolves would create a financial incentive for ODFW to allow more opportunities, Cady said.

"The hunting proposal sets up an incentive system whereby funding for the wolf program will rest upon making chronic depredation determinations and commissioning these hunts," he said in public testimony.

It's also premature, said Arran Robertson, spokesman from the environmental group Oregon Wild.

"The wolf population is still very small and in recovery," he said. "Deputizing the public to kill wolves on the agency's behalf presupposes that ODFW is going to need to kill so many wolves that they can't afford to do it anymore."

Even more controversial than allowing the public to hunt is the proposal that wolves be eliminated for "causing major declines of ungulate populations," such as deer and elk.

That question is also being considered by ODFW.

"Wolves can be very hard on ungulate populations," Akenson said. "We're just asking the department to look at specific cases and keep the hunting community as part of the equation as we move into the future."

As a research scientist for the University of Idaho in the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness, Akenson said he documented an elk herd reduction of over 50 percent in five years in one area caused primarily by wolf predation.

Environmental groups say killing any of the roughly 150 wolves to save a population of around 125,000 elk or 220,000 mule deer is premature and unnecessary. And, they said, the benefit of wolves is bringing equilibrium to the ungulate population.

"Let us put to bed the great unwashed notion that wolves routinely so negatively impact wild ungulate

populations that there is a precipitous decline in deer and elk," said Amaroq Weiss, West Coast Wolf Organizer for the Center for Biological Diversity. "Wolves and their wild prey evolved in lock-step for tens of thousands of years; it simply defies ecological sense for wolf predation to have a catastrophic impact on its wild prey."

Somewhere between nine and 14 wolves have been illegally killed in Oregon since 2007, according to police reports and ODFW data. That number may be higher, given most of the wolves tallied were wearing radio-collars.

The two sides disagree about the impact public hunting would have on wolf poaching in Oregon.

Todd Nash, a rancher from Enterprise, said he thought allowing the public to hunt could alleviate some of the frustration rural residents have felt with the arrival of wolves.

"You have to understand that having wolves here at all is a large stretch for a lot of people in the hunting and ranching community," said Nash, who works with the Oregon Cattlemen's Association. "I think allowing them to have some control in the process — instead of being told there's nothing they can do about a clear problem — would go a long way."

Environmental groups disagreed, and referenced a study published in the Royal Society Publishing that said "allowing wolf culling was substantially more likely to increase poaching than reduce it," according to the authors.

"Our results suggest that granting management flexibility for endangered species to address illegal (behavior) may instead promote such (behavior)," the study abstract said.

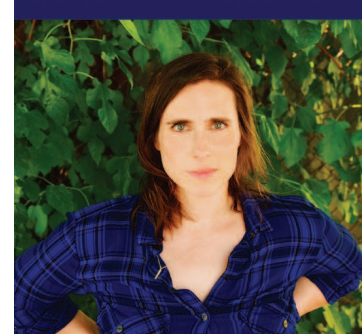
ODFW staff will make a recommendation on the issue and report to the Commission.



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