

Wolf criteria frustrates ranchers

Oregon cattlemen decry restrictions, delays in identifying wolf kills

By George Plaven
Capital Press

ENTERPRISE — Two days after Easter, rancher Rod Childers rode on horseback down Joseph Creek Canyon in far northeast Oregon, herding cattle through the steep and remote countryside.

His dogs were the first to spot the dead calf, its carcass chewed down to the bones. Instinctively, Childers suspected wolves. But rather than report the gruesome discovery to state wildlife biologists, he simply cursed to himself and kept going.

The reason, he would say later, was the rigid criteria state biologists use to confirm whether wolves had indeed killed the calf. That, plus the fact that evidence of wolf-related trauma was already lost to scavengers or the elements, made the effort futile despite the fact the Chesnimnus Pack had been seen in the area.

“You can go murder somebody and be convicted quicker than you would convict a wolf, with the criteria they have,” said Childers, owner of RL Cattle Co. in rural Wallowa County, where livestock and poultry sales totaled more than \$23 million in 2017. “It just makes it so difficult that ranchers have given up on it.”

The issue boiled over again April 16, when the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife released its annual wolf report documenting 158 wolves statewide in 2019 — a 15% increase from the previous year.

Yet the report also showed the number of confirmed attacks on livestock decreased 43%, which agency officials described as an indication that modern management techniques and non-lethal deterrents are helping wolves and ranchers peacefully coexist.

Some Eastern Oregon cattlemen, however, say it is less about coexistence and more about being hamstrung by ODFW and its requirements for investigating depredations. By the time a state biologist arrives at the scene, what little remains of a dead cow or calf often cannot be definitively linked to wolves.

Whether wolf depredation is confirmed may impact how much, if any, money ranchers receive in compensation from the state. In some cases, ranchers say it isn’t even worth calling the state to investigate, certain they will not be fully compensated.

“I’m pretty bitter over it,” Childers said. “I’m 20 years into this stuff. It’s not fun. It’s not right.”

Investigations

ODFW investigated 50 suspected cases of wolves attacking livestock in 2019. Of those, 16 were confirmed. One incident was ruled a “probable” wolf depredation, 12 were “possible or unknown,” and 21 were determined to be not wolf-related.

That is a sharp reduction from the 71 investigations and 28 confirmed attacks in 2018, when the



George Plaven/Capital Press
Rod Childers, of RL Cattle Co., runs livestock during the summer about 40 miles north of Enterprise in Joseph Creek Canyon.



Photo courtesy of Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife
A gray wolf with a transmitter collar lopes along in Oregon.

state’s minimum wolf population was 137.

While the state’s known wolf population has increased steadily over the last five years, the number of confirmed depredations on livestock has yo-yoed over the same period. In 2015, the agency confirmed nine attacks. In 2016, the total jumped to 24, and in 2017 it fell again to 17.

Derek Broman, state carnivore biologist for ODFW, said investigations are heavily evidence-based. Biologists look for telltale signs of wolves such as tracks and physical trauma to livestock.

A wolf’s bite mark is unmistakable compared to that of other predators such as coyotes and cougars, Broman said.

“If you’re trying to look for wolf signs with a microscope, then it’s not a wolf,” he said. “You’re just going to see, it’s like a bomb went off.”

Reports must be confirmed by ODFW for ranchers to receive direct compensation from the state through a fund administered by the Oregon Department of Agriculture. The program also pays for missing livestock and for non-lethal tools, such as hiring range riders or installing flashing lights and alarm boxes to keep wolves away from cattle.

Broman said he believes there were two reasons for fewer calls and confirmed depredations last year.

First, ranchers are becoming

more experienced at recognizing the evidence of a wolf attack, he said. If it doesn’t fit the bill, they don’t report it.

Second, ranchers are using more non-lethal tools to prevent conflicts.

“A lot of these folks are doing things to keep depredations down, which helps the bottom line,” Broman said.

It also helps protect wolves directly. Under Phase III of the recently updated Oregon Wolf Conservation and Management Plan, ranchers can apply to ODFW to kill wolves that prey on livestock two times within nine months — defined as “chronic depredation.”

Losing faith

Eastern Oregon entered Phase III of the wolf plan in 2017, meaning the region had at least seven breeding pairs of wolves for three consecutive years.

Gray wolves were removed from the state endangered species list in 2015, though they are still protected under the federal Endangered Species Act in the western two-thirds of the state, west of highways 395, 78 and 95.

Childers was on the wolf committee of the Oregon Cattlemen’s Association when the plan was originally adopted in 2005. He said Phase III was supposed to be the benchmark when wolves would be treated more like other predators around the state, with management zones and popula-

tion caps up for consideration.

Instead, Childers said, ranchers were largely ignored during the latest plan revision adopted by the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission last summer.

“We didn’t get anything we didn’t already have in that plan,” he said.

RL Cattle runs about 400 mother cows and calves on both public and private land. In June 2018, wolves injured three of Childers’ calves in three days, and ODFW granted him a 10-day permit to shoot one wolf in the same pasture. Two months later, after wolves killed another calf, ODFW reissued the permit for 30 days.

However, Childers was never able to fire a single shot. He criticized the permit for being overly restrictive.

“It’s very rare you get a chance to see these things,” Childers said. “(ODFW) wouldn’t come out and help me. I had to do it myself, which is damn near impossible.”

In the case of his dead calf in Joseph Canyon, Childers said it was already too degraded and consumed for ODFW to confirm it was killed by wolves.

“There’s not enough left for them, by their criteria, to say yes, a wolf killed this,” he said. “The criteria is what needs to change.”

Local control

Rodger Huffman, who ranches 23 miles southeast of La Grande, had a similar experience.

In April 2016, Huffman turned out his cattle to graze on a 167-acre pasture along Catherine Creek, where the forest meets the meadows. Five days later, he returned to check on the herd, finding one calf eaten all the way through its rib cage. Trampled grass around the carcass indicated a struggle took place.

By that time, though, it was too late. Without enough evidence remaining at the scene, ODFW ruled it a “possible/unknown” wolf attack.

Huffman is no stranger to predators. He worked as a trapper

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Business owners react to upcoming minimum wage hike

■ Increase in Oregon’s minimum wage takes effect July 1

By Dick Mason
EO Media Group

LA GRANDE — Local business owners have mixed feelings about Oregon’s fast approaching minimum wage jump.

The increase is set to take effect July 1 when the minimum wage in the state’s non-urban counties, which includes all of those in Northeast Oregon, will jump from \$11 an hour to \$11.50 an hour.

The jump is part of a series of 50 cent per hour minimum wage step increases the Legislature put in place when it passed Senate Bill 1532 in 2016. The annual increases will continue each year through 2022. The raises are being made throughout the state and are roughly based on geography.

Sandy Sorrels, owner of Ten Depot Street restaurant in La Grande, strongly opposes the increases, particularly the upcoming one.

“I think that the Legislature does not realize how hard this hits small businesses in Eastern Oregon. Especially now (because of COVID-19 driven recession), it is crippling,” Sorrels said.

Sorrels noted the Oregon Restaurant & Lodging Association is attempting to get the Legislature to delay putting the minimum wage increase into effect. Representatives of the association are trying to persuade lawmakers to postpone the increase during the special session, which was to start Wednesday and is set to end Friday.

The La Grande restaurant owner said she believes the state law raises the minimum wage too quickly. She said this prevents business owners from being able to make up the difference by raising prices. Sorrels noted if a minimum wage increase forces her to raise the price of a hamburger to \$15, diners will shy away because they are not accustomed to paying that much for the entrée.

“They will go someplace else or find something cheaper on the menu,” Sorrels said.

Beau Willadsen, owner of the La Grande McDonald’s, will not have to worry about raising the minimum wage his restaurant pays. Willadsen boosted his restaurant’s minimum wage to \$11.50 an hour on Jan. 1, six months before it was to become mandatory. He said he was inspired to do this because it would help him recruit more employees before summer hit, a time when it is hard for him to hire staff.

Willadsen also made the Jan. 1 move because he wanted to give his employees a boost.

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New version of salmon protection plan in the works

By Ellen Morris Bishop
EO Media Group

ENTERPRISE — More than a quarter century ago, Wallowa County produced one of the first community-generated, county-wide salmon plans in the nation. The landmark Wallowa County-Nez Perce Salmon Plan laid a foundation for restoration of salmon habitat, and for some revised practices in agriculture and forestry.

The original 1993 document addressed issues related to salmon that were just listed under the Endangered Species Act. The Nez Perce Tribe collaborated with Wallowa County farmers, ranchers, foresters, agencies, environmentalists and commissioners to recognize problems,

and designate areas that would benefit from habitat restoration. It provided landowners and agencies documentation for grants to fund improvements.

The 1993 plan, updated in 1999, is being redone as a new Wallowa County-Nez Perce Natural Resources Management Plan. The 20-person Wallowa County Natural Resources Advisory Committee is taking the lead. A related technical committee of mostly agency and tribal-based scientists and engineers is providing data and expertise. The draft document should be ready for public comment this coming spring.

The plan is targeted for implementation in the summer of 2021, according to Katy Nesbitt, Nat-

ural Resources Advisory Committee director.

The new version, like the old one, will likely become part of the Wallowa County Comprehensive Plan, pending approval by the Wallowa County commissioners.

“It is supposed to be a guiding document for the commissioners when they are working on natural resource issues,” said Jean Jancaitis, the Wallowa Resources Programs director who also coordinates the advisory committee’s grants. “It’s time to give them an update.”

The management plan will help plan for emerging threats to ecosystems and the economy. Those threats include climate change,



Photo by Ellen Morris Bishop/EO Media Group
Alain Bonneville casts his fly into the Lostine River on Friday. The new Wallowa County-Nez Perce Tribe Natural Resource Plan will consider all river basins in Wallowa County. The plan will replace the aging Wallowa County-Nez Perce Salmon Plan completed in 1993.

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