

WOLVES

Continued from Page A1

protections of wolves do not understand that the livelihood of independent ranchers like him is at stake — especially now that one of the few tools ranchers had to take out wolves that habitually prey on livestock has been taken away.

Vardanega said it is easy for city dwellers to romanticize wolves because they do not have to live with them.

“That’s not how it works in America,” Anderson said. “That’s not how it is supposed to work.”

Even before last month’s court decision returned some wolf populations to federal control, many Oregon ranchers were already suspicious of the state’s wolf plan, part of a policy structure that they believe is rigged against them by a hyper-liberal majority in Salem.

Vardanega said he does not trust ODFW and believes the agency has made wolf depredation too hard to prove.

The reason, he said, is because the agency has to toe a left-leaning political line. Thus, the process of establishing wolf depredation is fundamentally skewed to favor an environmentalist agenda.

Not only that, he said ranchers suffer in ways that the current system doesn’t even touch. In addition to above-average losses in circumstances where they can’t prove wolf kills, non-lethal measures mean a lot of additional work for ranchers that involves extra vigilance and the cost of paying a range rider upward of \$1,500 a month.

Along with paying the range rider, Vardanega said he is often anxiously awake at 2 a.m., casting spotlights into the dark to defend his herds.

Why were wolves relisted?

Environmental groups sued the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and former Interior Secretary David Bernhardt in 2021, after the Trump administration removed wolves from the endangered species in the waning days of his term. The conservation groups argued the delisting was premature.

In last month’s ruling, Judge Jeffrey S. White of the United States District Court for the Northern District of California said U.S. Fish and Wildlife did



Steven Mitchell/Blue Mountain Eagle

Izee rancher M.T. Anderson moves his cattle in February 2022. A state investigator could not determine whether a pair of wolves seen feeding on the carcass of one of Anderson’s cows in February caused the animal’s death.

not take into account wolves outside the Great Lakes and Northern Rocky Mountain regions when the agency proclaimed wolf conservation a success and removed the apex predators’ federal protections.

Ironically, removing wolves from the endangered species list is one goal that conservative and liberal administrations have long had in common.

Even though the decision to delist wolves came down during the Trump administration, attorneys for the Biden administration defended the rule that removed protections, arguing wolves were resilient enough to bounce back even if their numbers dropped sharply due to intensive hunting.

Not only that, but other Democratic and Republican administrations have tried to delist wolves over the years, failing every time. The last attempt to take wolves off the endangered list came during the Obama years.

According to John Williams, who chairs the wolf committee of the Oregon Cattlemen’s Association, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has 60 days to decide whether to appeal the U.S. District Court ruling. So far, Williams said, the cattlemen’s association has not heard if the agency intends to contest the decision.

Williams said the judge denied the livestock industry’s request for intervenor status, which would have given groups like his the ability to appeal.

Meanwhile, the Center for Biological Diversity, one of the environmental groups behind the lawsuit that overturned the Trump

administration’s delisting decision, is trying to extend federal wolf protections still further.

A question of trust

Ranchers who lose livestock to wolf depredation are supposed to be compensated for the value of the animals, but getting paid is not as simple as filing a claim.

First, the cattlemen’s association’s Williams said, the livestock producer has to find the carcass — and they need to find it quickly, before decomposition makes it impossible to identify as a wolf kill. Then, he said, an investigation has to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that it was wolves that killed the animal.

If a wolf kill is confirmed, Williams said, the rancher can submit a request for compensation through their county’s compensation committee. That’s assuming the rancher’s county has a committee — not all counties do.

Finally, he said, there has to be money available in the county’s compensation fund. Those funds can be depleted by prior claims, and counties must apply to the state for more money on an annual basis.

The cattlemen’s association supported House Bill 4127, a measure in the 2022 Legislature to provide an additional \$1 million for the state’s wolf compensation fund to reimburse ranchers for dead and missing livestock and the cost of non-lethal methods for preventing wolf attacks.

After a public hearing last month, the bill died in committee without ever getting the chance for a floor vote.

Danielle Moser, coordinator of

Oregon Wild’s wildlife program, said she wanted to see more transparency in the compensation program. Other critics argued that the wolf compensation fund is prone to misuse, and putting more money into it would encourage ranchers not to look for missing animals but instead simply default to blaming wolves.

Rep. Mark Owens, R-Crane, was one of the bill’s chief sponsors. He contends environmental groups targeted the bill not on its merits but simply because killing it would make their supporters feel good about protecting wolves.

“Bumper-sticker politics won the day without substance,” Owens said.

Who makes the call?

There were 49 confirmed wolf depredations across the state last year, according to Ryan Torland, a district biologist with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife.

ODFW will continue to be the agency conducting depredation investigations, Torland said, even in parts of Oregon where wolves are now under federal jurisdiction. However, he added, only the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will be able to authorize lethal take of wolves in those areas.

“As far as I know they have not approved the take of any wolves while the wolves have been on the endangered species list,” he said. “They possess that authority while listed, and ODFW does not.”

Torland said an ODFW investigation of a possible wolf depredation is similar to a detective’s evaluation of a crime scene. He told the Eagle that biologists gather information and send it to the agency’s wolf experts in La Grande, who make the call whether a wolf was responsible for the death of an animal.

He said ODFW investigators operate much like sheriff’s deputies from a crime scene to the district attorney to decide whether there is enough to prove someone committed a crime.

Grant County Sheriff Todd McKinley agreed with that assessment.

“It is not much different than a fairly major crime scene,” McKinley said. “You’ve got something that’s been killed or attacked, and you’ve got to find

the facts. And if you’re going to do it, you better put the effort into it and do it right.”

McKinley had something like that in mind when he invited Baker County Sheriff Travis Ash to speak to the Grant County Stockgrowers Association about how Baker County handles wolf depredations during the group’s March meeting at the Grant County Fairgrounds.

Ash said he has heard the complaints, concerns and arguments from livestock producers regarding wolf depredations and how ODFW investigates them. However, he said, Baker County is about five or six years down the road from where Grant County is when it comes to wolf depredations.

“Build those relationships with those guys that have to do the work,” he said. “And understand, though, that if the evidence isn’t there, they have to say that the evidence is not there.”

McKinley’s staff is gearing up to do depredation investigations in Grant County. McKinley told the stockgrowers that Undersheriff Zach Mobley and Sgt. Danny Komning have been through ODFW’s wolf training and that he could get other deputies trained as well.

An emotional issue

For Vardanega, wolves are a personal issue. Many of those who support putting wolves back on the endangered species list do not realize how hard ranchers work and how protecting their cattle against predators brings a high cost in both money and time.

“This is real life,” he said.

“This is how we make a living.” Oregon Wild’s Danielle Moser takes wolves personally, too. To Moser, wolves are an iconic species that deserve protection.

“I think (wolves) are the essential American animal in many ways,” she said.

For Williams, the wolf committee chair for the cattlemen’s association, the wolf debate boils down to two competing sets of values: one that prioritizes animals, and one that prioritizes people.

“(Environmentalists) have different priorities,” Williams said. “They’re more interested in hearing a wolf howl than they are (a rancher) being able to have their way of life.”

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