

SNOWPACK

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the northern Blue Mountains near Tollgate, the water content at the start of April was 17.8 inches — 74% of average. By month's end the water content had risen to 21.6 inches. More notably, that figure was 177% of average. A similar trend prevailed at

some other sites:
• Moss Springs above Cove — 76% of average at the start of April, 117% at the end.
• Bald Mountain, near Moss Springs — 59% to 109%.
• Mount Howard, near Wallowa Lake — 84% to 106%.
• Aneroid Lake, Eagle Cap Wilderness south of Wallowa Lake — 61% to 74%.
Jason Yencopal, Baker County

emergency management director who also does snow surveys, plodded through the drifts to a meadow just east of Anthony Lake on the first day of May. He measured 64 inches of snow — up from 49 inches at the end of March. The water content rose during April from 19.5 inches — 61% of average — to 25.5 inches, 91% of average.

One damp month can't end the region's drought, to be sure. As of May 3, all of North-eastern Oregon was in either moderate, severe or extreme drought, according to the U.S. Drought Monitor. (The monitor uses a five-level rating system — abnormally dry, and four categories of drought: moderate, severe, extreme and exceptional.) Most of Baker County remains

in extreme drought, with a small part on the western side, and much of the Panhandle, in severe drought. Phillips Reservoir in Sumpter Valley, which supplies irrigation water for more than 30,000 acres in Baker Valley, is holding just 12% of its capacity. Thief Valley Reservoir, near North Powder, is full, and Unity Reservoir in southern Baker County is 92% full.

RANCHERS

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"They've done one but not the other," he said. "They've been highly critical of poaching, and I'm not defending that, but they need to step up to the plate when it's appropriate for them to take lethal action, and they have not done so." He emphasized that he doesn't mean elimination of wolves as a species.

"We're not talking about total eradication of wolves," he said. "When wolves get to be chronic depredators of livestock, then you have to be effective managers."

But the kill permit issued to Birkmaier allows what is already legal in Oregon's eastside cattle country, where wolves were removed from the state's endangered species list in 2015. State law allows a rancher to eliminate wolves after two confirmed kills of cattle.

"We already have permitless take in that anybody on this side of the state where wolves are chasing, biting, killing their livestock, they have the authority to go ahead and kill the wolves," he said. "So the permit they gave was not much different than what we already have available to us."

Nash said the ODFW issuance of a kill permit wasn't effective wolf management. "Their response was to give two kill permits for a given area. In that area, it's restrictive," Nash said. "I'm going to use the example of if (serial killer) Ted Bundy moved out of one apartment

and into another, you'd just say, 'Oh, he's moved now. You can't arrest him.' ... Instead of the whole pack, they've restricted the area down."

Nash showed photographs of sheep that were killed April 29 in the Elk Mountain area of Wallowa County. Three lambs and two ewes were killed and the report blamed the depredation on coyotes, officially calling the responsibility "other."

He showed photos of fresh wolf tracks nearby and a dog track to compare for size. He also decried what the ODFW said was a coyote attack.

"Those (wolf) tracks were right next to where the sheep were killed," he said. "And they're calling it a coyote? But there wasn't a fresh coyote track out there. There were some old ones."

Williams also was on the scene of the attack on the sheep. He agreed it was a wolf attack and not coyotes.

Nash said he went right to the top of the agency.

"They're absolutely wrong on this one," he said. "I talked to the director and asked for a review, that they take a keen look at this because they're just wrong."

Like Birkmaier about his agent who shot a wolf, the owner of the sheep wanted to remain anonymous. Both hope to keep a good relationship with the ODFW.

Birkmaier said the local ODFW agents have offered to help tend his cattle.

Nash mentioned another case where he believed the ODFW had fallen short. Last year the Lookout

Mountain Pack killed cattle and ODFW hunters killed two wolf cubs. Later, the hunters killed two more.

"But why kill the pups when it's the adults who do the hunting?" Nash asked. "It was like punishing the kids for their parents' misbehavior."

Michelle Dennehy, ODFW spokesperson, said the Lookout Mountain Pack was a difficult case.

"This was an attempt to keep the pack intact," she said. "The breeding male and female were colored and with all those mouths to feed can lead to depredation."

She said the "cubs" were partially grown and already hunters.

"These were 40-pound wolves that were no longer in the den," Dennehy said. "Lookout Mountain was a tough one. It worked for a while, but started up again."

Agency report

The most recent livestock kills in Wallowa County reported on ODFW's wolf depredation report were on April 30. Three more attacks were listed in Baker County on May 5.

Birkmaier said he's lost

a couple more calves this month and he's spending time treating a calf that he's not sure will survive.

"I'm spending an hour a day doctoring the other one," he said. "I can't get ahead of the infection."

He said he understands it takes a while for the agency to complete investigations and list the depredations, but wolves don't wait around for agency paperwork.

"Generally, they take great deal of time when time is of the essence," Williams said.

Dennehy said determinations of reported wolf kills are generally reported within 48 hours of a producer's report. When the agency's determination is considered unsatisfactory to the producer, a review process is available.

"If requested by the owner of the livestock, we have a process to review disputed determinations and that is happening now," Dennehy said about the April 29 sheep kill.

As of May 9, the report still said "bite wounds were consistent with coyote attacks on sheep" and listed the determination as "other."

Nonlethal efforts not enough

Birkmaier has been known for his efforts to use nonlethal deterrents to keep wolves at bay.

"He's doing every non-lethal (action) everybody can dream up," Williams said. "What was more effective was he had a lot of people out there helping with nonlethal presence of humans."

"I'm still continuing the relentless nonlethal measures, including two AM-FM radios, two fox lights that come on at

night and motion-triggered noise-making devices that have a siren and flashing lights," Birkmaier said. "I've been putting those in saddles on ridges or any natural crossing area where wolves may enter pasture."

But there are only so many hours in the day and a rancher has other jobs besides tending cattle.

"I'm still averaging 16-20 hours a day with the cows," he said. "You know how far behind I am and how my family's suffering from not having a dad and husband around?"

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