

Washington's first wolf pack was discovered in 2008

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House Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee Chairman Brian Blake represents the state's southwest corner, far removed from wolf country. He agrees with those who say the plan calls for too many wolves over too large a territory.

The Aberdeen Democrat said a small percentage of Washingtonians are sacrificing for wolf recovery, and the current plan doesn't provide relief.

"The original wolf plan was flawed," Blake said. "It was a recipe for failure, and a failure is what we're seeing."

No progress documented

Federal recovery goals for the Rocky Mountain region were met seven years after wolves were released in central Idaho and Yellowstone National Park in 1995. In Oregon, state recovery goals were achieved last year, six years after the first wolf pack was documented in 2008.

Washington's first wolf pack was discovered in 2008, too. It has nearly as many wolves as Oregon, but under the state's wolf plan recovery is at least several years away and as much as a decade away, wildlife officials say. WDFW estimates wolves will be eligible to be taken off the state's protected species list by 2021 — plus or minus three years. On paper, there's been no progress in meeting recovery goals in three years.

The key difference between Washington's wolf plan and the plans other states used is the minimum number of breeding pairs needed before wildlife managers can consider management measures, including hunting, to control how many wolves live in the state, and where.

A 17-member work group that developed Washington's plan decided the state should have at least 15 breeding pairs, a number considered too low by two of three scientists who conducted a peer review. Nevertheless, it was more breeding pairs than required in other states.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in the 1980s declared that Idaho, Montana and Wyoming each needed at least 10 breeding pairs before gray wolves would be eligible to be taken off the list of endangered species. But in neighboring Oregon, only four breeding pairs are required for recovery under that state's plan.

Washington has counted five breeding pairs each year since 2011. During that time, the wolf population has almost doubled, from 35 to 68, and the number of packs has more than doubled, from 7 to 16.

"What does that tell you?" asked Washington Cattlemen's Association Executive Vice President Jack Field. To him, it says counting breeding pairs is the wrong measurement.

"It's got to be packs," he said. "It's simple and attainable."

WDFW defines packs as two or more wolves traveling together in the winter.

However, the definition doesn't address whether wolves are successfully establishing a family unit, said Tim Coleman, executive director of the pro-wolf Kettle Range Conservation Group. "Two animals is not really a pack," he said.

When the wolf plan was written, dissenters in the work group, including Field, said 15 breeding pairs — 50 percent more than in states with fewer people and more wolf habitat — "defies common sense." Washington has more than 7 million residents, while Oregon has 3.9 million and Idaho 1.6 million. The dissenters proposed eight breeding pairs.

To count as a breeding pair, a male and female must have at least two pups surviving to the end of the year. But that definition may be too narrow, critics say. In 2014, a Lookout pack male and female raised one pup in north-central Washington, an area ravaged by the largest wildfire in state history. A female in the Smackout pack raised four pups after a cougar killed her mate. In both cases, the pups didn't count toward

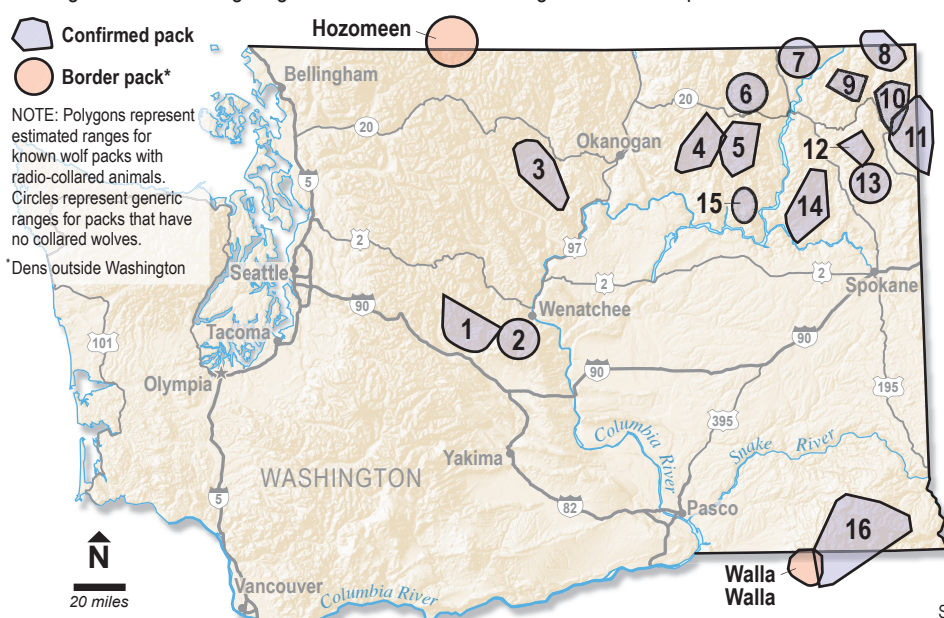


Where the wolves are in Washington

As Washington's wolf population grows, so does criticism of the state's recovery goals. Fifteen breeding pairs, distributed throughout the state, must be documented before wolves will be eligible to be delisted in northeast Washington.

Known Washington wolf packs (As of March 6)

The majority of Washington's wolves are concentrated in the northeast corner of the state, although unconfirmed sightings west of the Cascade Range have been reported.



Pack size (Refer to map, left)

1. Teanaway	5
2. Wenatchee	2
3. Lookout	4
4. Strawberry	3
5. Nc'icn	4
6. Profanity Peak	6
7. Wedge	2
8. Salmo	3
9. Smackout	5
10. Goodman Meadows	6
11. Diamond	2
12. Dirty Shirt	3
13. Carpenter Ridge	4
14. Huckleberry	6
15. Whitestone	2
16. Tucannon	2
Lone wolves	9
Total	68

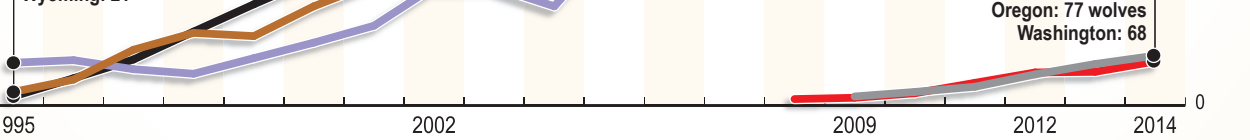
Source: Washington Dept. of Fish and Wildlife

Wolf populations in neighboring states

Washington and Oregon's burgeoning wolf population resembles that of other Western states before their wolf numbers increased dramatically.

Sources: Washington Dept. of Fish and Wildlife; Oregon Dept. of Fish and Wildlife; Idaho Dept. of Fish and Game; Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks; Wyoming Game and Fish Dept.

Wolves released into Greater Yellowstone and Central Idaho:
Idaho: 14 wolves
Montana: 66
Wyoming: 21



A brief history of wolves in Washington

1915 — Congress appropriates \$125,000 to remove wolves, coyotes and other predators from public lands in the West.

1930s — Once common in Washington, wolves are exterminated statewide.

1980 — U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recommends reintroducing wolves into central Idaho and Yellowstone National Park.

1986 — Wolves from Canada begin colonizing in northwest Montana.

1995-96 — 31 wolves from Canada are released in Yellowstone National Park and

35 in central Idaho.

2008 — First pack in Washington since 1930s documented in Okanogan County.

2011 — Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife Commission adopts wolf recovery plan that carves state into three zones. Each zone must have at least four breeding pairs, with a statewide total of at least 15. WDFW counts 35 wolves; seven packs; five breeding pairs.



2014 — WDFW counts 68 wolves; 16 packs; five breeding pairs. There are 56 wolves and four breeding pairs in Eastern Washington, 12 wolves and one breeding pair in Northern Cascades and zero wolves in South Cascades.



Don Jenkins and Alan Kenagal/Capital Press

the recovery goals.

WDFW wolf policy lead Dave Ware said there may be more breeding pairs than the five found last year by biologists. "That's what we were able to document. It doesn't mean that's what's on the ground," he said.

Veteran wolf manager Carter Niemeyer, who oversaw Idaho's wolf recovery before retiring in 2006 from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, said he believes the state can support the number of breeding pairs called for in the wolf plan. "Fifteen breeding pairs doesn't seem unrealistic to me," he said.

Besides breeding pairs, Washington's plan judges success by the number of wolves reproducing in each of three zones. Each zone must have at least four breeding pairs for at least three consecutive years.

There are four pairs in Eastern Washington, one in the North Cascades and none in the South Cascades.

Ware said wolves likely are

more widely distributed than the count shows.

More wolf sightings

Although the agency has not documented any wolves in the South Cascades, wolf sightings there are constant and credible, he said. A recent WDFW wolf presentation included a photo of a wolf in a field in Klickitat County in south-central Washington.

Wolves may even be crossing the Cascade Range. A wolf was seen in late April standing on Interstate 90 in eastern King County. By the time state wildlife managers arrived, the 2-year-old female had been hit and killed by a truck. She was the first known wild gray wolf west of the Cascades in decades.

Grant County rancher Bill Sieverkropp, president of the state cattlemen's association, said he hasn't seen any wolves in his section of Central Washington, but there's talk.

"You always hear rumors," he said. "I imagine when the population grows, eventually

we will see some come through our area."

Klickitat County rancher Neil Kayser says he's skeptical wolves have ventured down to where he is in south-central Washington, not far from the Columbia River and Oregon, which lies south of it. His cousin and fellow rancher, Keith Kreps, says he hasn't seen any signs either and isn't worried about lone wolves passing through. But he says he's heard of reliable sightings and thinks wolves will come and packs will form.

"We are going to have them eventually. You can almost guarantee it's going to happen," he said. "We think the cat (cougar) problem is bad. This will be bad."

Blake, the state legislator, said he believes wolves have made their way to the timbered wilderness of the South Cascades.

"We know there are wolves down there," he said. "That is dense, difficult ground for biologists to operate in to quantify wolves, and that's going to be a

huge hurdle."

In the North Cascades, Niemeyer took up residence in a tent in mid-May to help Washington State University graduate students find wolves to collar in Okanogan County. By late May, they were still looking, without luck.

"I guess I'm skeptical wolves will spread in Washington like prairie fire. I really don't buy that," he said.

Idaho counted 14 wolves before the Canadian imports were released 20 years ago. The count rose steadily and peaked at 856 in 2009, the first year a state-sponsored wolf hunt was allowed.

Niemeyer cautions against assuming Washington will see the same unrelenting growth as Idaho did. Too many factors, such as the deaths of breeding females, could delay recovery, he said.

Still, Niemeyer said wolves will disperse. "There's no doubt. It's just a slow, gradual process. They will get there. Wolves are tough, re-

silient and prolific," he said.

A WDFW consultant, Francine Madden, recently interviewed more than 90 ranchers, environmentalists, biologists, legislators and others interested in Washington's wolves and found, unsurprisingly, strong feelings.

She also noted that her interview subjects were aware that most Washingtonians were "only mildly interested" in wolf recovery.

The deeply involved minority has presented the mildly interested majority with two competing narratives.

One narrative says reintroducing a wily apex predator has burdened northeast Washington residents. Wolves are entrenched in the region, and livestock losses are mounting. Yet, statewide recovery is long into the future. Therefore, wolves should be delisted in Eastern Washington and managed accordingly.

The other narrative asserts that wolves and ranchers can co-exist and that recovery is on track. Wolves are about to break out and blossom into a statewide and sustainable population. Don't change a good plan that's working.

Balancing act

The Legislature may yet produce a bill this year that seeks to balance those views.

House Bill 2107 would require WDFW to reconsider the wolf plan, but the legislation does not mandate any changes. WDFW would review several issues, including whether poaching penalties are high enough and under what circumstances the agency will kill wolves to protect livestock.

Washington wolves made up less than 4 percent of the 1,802 gray wolves counted in five Western states last year but accounted for almost 10 percent of the 312 sheep and cattle confirmed killed by wolves, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Washington wolves took at least two cows and 28 sheep, according to WDFW, though Stevens County rancher Dave Dashiell estimates he actually lost more than 300 animals to the Huckleberry pack.

A state lawmaker from northeast Washington, Rep. Joel Kretz, has more than once told his colleagues in Olympia that "social tolerance" for wolves is about gone in his district.

Northeast Washington ranchers and county commissioners this year delivered the same message in intense testimony at the Capitol in Olympia.

"We can't afford to wait for the whole state to recover because there won't be any of us left," Dashiell told legislators.

Kretz has proposed relocating wolves to unoccupied areas to hasten statewide recovery, an option included in the state's wolf plan. The option, though, looks highly unlikely. No legislator has volunteered to have his district host wolves.

So wolves must spread naturally and at their own pace.

Field, of the cattlemen's association, said he believes recovery will come before WDFW's projected date of 2021. "I'm going to put my money on the under," he said.

The bet is based on expectations that wolves will multiply rapidly. It's also based on the idea that WDFW may change how it measures recovery from breeding pairs to packs.

Field said he thinks recovery will occur before 2021 even if WDFW sticks with breeding pairs. "I'm going to be naively optimistic and say 'Yes,'" he said.

Coleman, one of the environmentalists on WDFW's wolf advisory group, agrees. "More than likely, yes, it will come earlier," he said. "I think it will happen because the habitat is there."

In the meantime, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service calls the wolf comeback in the West an "amazing success." It's considering taking gray wolves off the endangered species list entirely, including Central and Western Washington.

Blake said Washington errs by not considering the federal success good enough. The state's wolves should be seen as the western edge of a thriving Rocky Mountain population, he said.

"Personally, I believe wolves are biologically recovered in Washington state today," he said.