

Oregon

Environmentalists challenge USDA's authority to kill wolves

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

EUGENE, Ore. — Environmentalists say the USDA's contract to kill wolves on behalf of Oregon wildlife officials is unlawful because the federal agency hasn't properly analyzed environmental impacts.

The USDA, meanwhile, argues a lawsuit over the agreement is baseless because Oregon can kill problematic wolves even without federal assistance.

"This is predominantly a state program. The USDA is very much a bit player," said Sean Martin, attorney for the agency, during oral arguments on Feb. 16 in Eugene, Ore.

Wolves in Eastern Oregon are no longer listed as threatened under the federal Endangered Species Act but



Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press File

The U.S. District Courthouse in Eugene, Ore. Arguments were heard Feb. 16 in a lawsuit against the USDA over its participation in killing wolves that attack livestock in Oregon.

their population in that region is still managed under a state plan.

USDA's Wildlife Services division killed two wolves at Oregon's behest in 2009,

which prompted environmental groups to file a lawsuit against the agency.

Under a settlement deal, USDA agreed to conduct an environmental assessment of

its lethal wolf removal agreement with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife.

In 2014, the USDA's analysis concluded its wolf control activities didn't have significant environmental impacts, but five environmental groups — Cascadia Wildlands, Center for Biological Diversity, Wildearth Guardians, Predator Defense and Project Coyote — challenged that finding in federal court last year.

The plaintiffs asked U.S. District Judge Michael McShane to prohibit Wildlife Services from killing wolves in Oregon because USDA's environmental assessment of the contract violated the National Environmental Policy Act.

USDA failed to take a "hard look" at the impact of killing wolves on the species'

population and ecosystem, said John Mellgren, attorney for the environmental groups.

Reducing predation on livestock by killing wolves hasn't been conclusively shown to be effective over the long term, so the strategy requires a greater degree of scrutiny by USDA, he said.

"It's not settled science. There is controversy in the scientific community," Mellgren said.

USDA's analysis didn't sufficiently consider the disruption to pack structure from lethal removal and neglected actions against wolves taken in neighboring states, he said.

The plaintiffs also argued that Wildlife Services will dispatch wolves more efficiently than Oregon wildlife managers, which casts doubt on the USDA's claim that Oregon's lethal control activities

will proceed without federal help.

Non-target animals can be also killed by traps intended for wolves, but the USDA didn't analyze these impacts as required, Mellgren said.

"We don't know that because it's not disclosed anywhere in the record," he said of the number non-target killings.

The cumulative effects of USDA's involvement in Oregon's wolf control program should have triggered a more comprehensive "environmental impact statement," or EIS, he said.

The USDA countered that even if Wildlife Services was ordered to desist from killing wolves, Oregon's lethal control efforts would continue.

"This isn't some brand new course of action," Martin said.

E. Oregon job growth expected to trail behind state through 2024

By CLAIRE WITHYCOMBE
Capital Bureau

SALEM — Job growth in Oregon's rural areas — particularly southeastern Oregon — is projected to trail the rest of the fast-growing state until 2024, according to the Oregon Employment Department.

Oregon's jobs are expected to grow 14 percent between 2014 and 2024, more than double the national expected rate for that period.

But in Harney and Malheur counties, the number of jobs is expected to increase merely 3 percent until 2024.

That's compared to 6 and 7 percent in neighboring counties to the north and west, which is a rate on par with expected job growth nationally.

Counties near the central Columbia River Gorge, meanwhile, are expected to see 11 percent job growth until 2024.

The outlook comes in the broader context of the slow post-recession jobs recovery in rural areas of the state.

While Oregon as a whole has made up the jobs it lost during the Great Recession, that's not the case for many of the state's rural areas — such as Gilliam and Wheeler counties. But the future may be brighter for them: Both are projected to exceed the country's jobs growth rate until 2024.

Construction, health care and professional and business services jobs are expected to grow the fastest, according to a presentation employment department officials made to lawmakers on the state's workforce committee Thursday.

The high-tech sector is also expected to continue growing — a recent dip in jobs can be attributed to layoffs in the semiconductor industry, but the overall trend is upward, said Nick Beleiciks, a state employment economist with the Oregon Employment Department.

Filling those new jobs may be a challenge in rural Oregon, too, though.

Some employers in rural areas say they struggle to attract and retain young talent, Melisa Drugge, a business development officer for Business Oregon's Eastern region, told lawmakers.

There are a number of factors at work. For example, many millennials — ages 19 to 30 — gravitate toward urban centers with cultural amenities.

And finding adequate housing for workers in communities such as Joseph in Wallowa County — where many homes are vacation properties — is a challenge, Drugge said.

State Rep. Mark Johnson, R-Hood River, said some employers in the Columbia River Gorge are busying workers from the Portland and Vancouver areas because they can't find or afford local housing.



Courtesy of WSDA

The Oregon Department of Agriculture may reduce the number of federal food inspections it does so it can catch up on other inspections, the state Board of Agriculture was told recently.

Oregon farm regulators may scale back federal inspections

Added staff time needed to reduce backlog of state inspections

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

SALEM — Oregon's farm regulators may curtail inspections conducted on behalf of the federal government to free up time to tackle a backlog of state food safety inspections.

The Oregon Department of Agriculture performs 500 inspections a year to ensure food manufacturers are following federal sanitation standards and other regulations, for which the U.S. Food and Drug Administration pays the agency \$700,000.

Last year, a state audit found that ODA's food safe-

ty program had a backlog of 2,800 facilities — such as processors, dairies and bakeries — that were overdue for an inspection by at least three months.

As part of its plan to reduce the backlog, ODA is considering trimming the number of federal inspections to 400 a year, which would also reduce its federal funding for inspections by one-fifth, said Stephanie Page, the agency's director of food safety and animal health.

That shift would free up about 700 hours a year that ODA employees could devote to state inspections, which are typically more streamlined and require less extensive reports than federal inspections, Page said during a recent meeting of the Oregon Board of Agriculture.

Currently, the ODA employs 32 inspectors, two field operation managers and 7 specialists who also

conduct inspections.

It's also possible that ODA will withdraw from the FDA's Manufactured Food Regulatory Program Standards program, a cooperative food safety effort that enrolls state agencies, Page said.

The ODA has enforcement authorities, such as suspending or revoking operating licenses, necessary to ensure food safety, she said. "We have the teeth we need to deal with issues."

Oregon's contemplated decrease in federal inspections comes at a time when the FDA is poised to become even more dependent on state officials to carry out the Food Safety Modernization Act.

The law was enacted in 2011 but the FDA spent several years completing the rules for farmers and manufacturers, which state agencies are expected to help implement.

The FSMA regulations will likely make federal inspec-

tions of food facilities even more time-consuming, likely further reducing the number of such inspections that ODA can handle, said Page.

Aside from enhanced inspections of manufacturing facilities, FSMA requires on-site inspections of farms that grow produce that is eaten raw.

The ODA isn't certain it wants to perform such in-

spections, though the agency has asked state lawmakers for that authority just in case, said Page.

If the agency does conduct on-farm inspections for FDA, it would need a separate group of employees dedicated to the task, she said.

"We have to have federal funds to do it and we have to have additional staff," Page said.

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