Washington lawmaker prods WDFW to collar more wolves

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

WDFW File

A male wolf walks away after being sedated and fitted with a radio collar in Pend Oreille County, Wash. A state legislator has proposed that the state collar more wolves.

OLYMPIA — A Northeast Washington legislator, unhappy with the state Department of Fish and Wildlife's efforts to separate wolves and cattle, has introduced a bill directing the department to collar more wolves with radio transmitters, especially in packs that have attacked livestock.

Rep. Joel Kretz, an Okanogan County Republican, said ranchers are committed to protecting herds with non-lethal tactics, but are handicapped by not knowing about pack movements over large territories.

He said he was particularly concerned that the department does not have a collared wolf in the Togo pack, which has preyed on cattle in northeast Washington for several years.

"To be effective with any deterrence, you have to have an idea where the wolves are," Kretz said. "How do you rangeride if you have no idea whether a wolf is within a 100 miles?"

Fish and Wildlife wolf policy lead Donny Martorello said the department also wants to have more collars on wolves, including the Togo pack. "It is on our priority list, as is Grouse Flats," he said, referring to a pack that has attacked cattle in southeast Washington.

Trapping, however, is difficult and gets more difficult as wolves learn to avoid traps, he said. The department has tried several times to trap an adult female in the Togo pack, he said. "She's not going to step into a trap. She's educated. She's too smart to step into a trap."

Fish and Wildlife puts radio-collars on wolves for several reasons, including research and to track whether wolves are moving west as envisioned in the state's recovery plan. In wolf-colonized northeast and southeast Washington, the collars help confirm depredations and are vital to finding packs if the department resorts to shooting wolves.

Capital Press file

A Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife biologist holds a radio collar that wildlife managers use to track wolves. A state legislator wants the agency to collar more wolves to track their movement.

Currently, 14 wolves in eight packs are collared, a Fish and Wildlife spokesman said Thursday. The count includes two wolves that have left packs and one wolf collared by the Spokane Indian tribe. The department counted 126 wolves in 27 packs at the end of 2018. An updated count has not been announced.

House Bill 2906 proposes that Fish and Wildlife more than double the number of collared wolves. The department would be required to collar at least two wolves in packs that have been attacking livestock and would be "encouraged" to have a collar in every pack.

The department must trap and collar the wolves within its current budget, according to the bill. "It's kind of saying, 'Do your job,' " Kretz said.

Martorello said the department would like to have two collars in packs preying on livestock. Besides wolves growing wise to traps, trapping is hindered by weather, he said.

The department sets ground traps in only the spring and summer because a wolf captured in the winter could freeze to death. In the winter, the department tries to find packs from a helicopter, but the weather hinders searches, Martorello said. The department also tries to find packs on the ground in the winter, but "that's an extreme long shot," he said.

Martorello said he's confident in the department's trapping abilities. "Our folks who do wolf trapping are very, very experienced," he said.

Stevens County Cattlemen's Association President Scott Nielsen said more collars are "absolutely necessary," especially in areas where ranchers lose cattle every year to wolves.

"For non-lethals to be effective, we have to have that information, and it hasn't been available," he said. "Let's get some collars in these chronic-conflict zones."

Kretz's bill has 11 co-sponsors — a mix of Republicans and Democrats across the political spectrum.

Federal crop insurance for hemp available soon

By GEORGE PLAVEN
Capital Press

PORTLAND — Federal crop insurance for hemp is coming this year, though questions remain about what exactly will be covered under the new policies.

Ben Thiel, Northwest regional director for the USDA Risk Management Agency, said rates for crop insurance are calculated using hard data such as market prices and anticipated yield. That is more difficult with hemp, which was just legalized in the 2018 Farm Bill.

"Because hemp is so new ... without that data, it's hard to set rates," Thiel said. "We have to be, to some extent, debt-neutral and accountable to taxpayers."

Thiel spoke during the annual Hemp & CBD Connex Conference on Jan. 30 at the Portland Expo Center, where he gave growers a brief overview of crop insurance and shared limited details about the hemp plan, which has yet to be officially released.

The USDA announced in December it would provide insurance coverage for hemp growers in certain counties across 21 states — including Oregon and California, but not Washington and Idaho. To be eligible, producers must comply with all state and federal laws, have at least one year of history growing the crop and have a contract for sale in place.

Thiel said the policy, developed by the Texas-based consulting company AgriLogic, was "one of the fastest developments ever for an insurance product." He expects it will be released soon by USDA officials, with a signup date of March 15.

The 2019 growing season proved exceptionally challenging for Oregon hemp producers. Early rains in the Willamette Valley forced growers to harvest early or risk losing whole fields to gray mold. In

George Harris

Central Oregon, a devastating hail storm damaged an estimated 400 to 500 acres of hemp last August.

"Crop insurance covers natural causes of loss," Thiel said. "It's not going to make you rich, but it is going to make a difference staying in business."

With federal crop insurance, policies are developed and subsidized by the government though they are sold through private insurance companies.

George Harris, a crop insurance agent with Northwest Farm Credit Services, said the biggest tripping point for hemp growers will likely be ensuring the crop does not exceed the 0.3% tetrahydrocannabinol, or THC, threshold. If hemp tests "hot," then it is considered marijuana, which is still illegal under federal law and must be destroyed under interim USDA regulations.

Crop insurance would not cover those losses, Harris said.

"If you go above that THC level, it is going to be uninsurable," he said.

Since Oregon implemented its hemp pilot program under the 2014 Farm Bill, it has tested only for "delta-9" THC under the 0.3% limit. But federal rules call for testing "total THC," including tetrahydrocannabinolic acid that can convert to psychoactive delta-9 form when heated.

Some growers have expressed concern that it will be impossible for them to produce hemp in compliance with the USDA's interim rule. Oregon's two U.S. senators, Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley, have urged the agency to reconsider the THC requirement in its final rules.