

Farm Bureau: WDFW should let ranchers see where wolves are

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

Washington ranchers in wolf country should get GPS-collar data, rather than depend on state wildlife managers to tell them where dens are in the spring and early summer, a state Farm Bureau official said Tuesday at a meeting of Fish and Wildlife’s Wolf Advisory Group.

The organization’s director of government relations, Tom Davis, a member of the group, said he’s frustrated by the department’s long-standing policy of blacking out collar data until July 16, well after cattle are turned out on summer grazing pastures.

The department should trust ranchers to stay away from dens, he said.

“If you get a bad actor, you do something about the bad actor, but you don’t treat everyone like a bad actor, and that’s what they’re doing now,” Davis said in an interview.

Fish and Wildlife officials defended the black-out period. Wolf specialist Ben Maletzke said the department keeps ranchers informed about pack movements, including the location of stationary dens. “You don’t need daily conversations to tell them it’s in the same place,” he said.

The advisory group met by phone Tuesday and planned to meet again Wednesday to



Capital Press File

A Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife biologist holds a radio collar that wildlife managers use to track wolves. The department has adopted a more restrictive policy on providing collar data to ranchers.

review wolf-related activities by the department. Davis used the opportunity to challenge the department’s black-out policy.

Ranchers should be able to check daily on wolf movements without waiting to be contacted by the department, he said.

“I still don’t understand why we’re not making it easier to get this information in the hands of the producers,” Davis said. “We won’t be comfortable until that data pipeline is opened up more, for the good our producers.”

The collars intermittently signal the location of a wolf, identifying dens in the spring and rendezvous sites in the summer, and giving an overall picture of a pack’s territory.

Fish and Wildlife had collars on 28 wolves, or 22% of the state’s population, at some point in 2019.

After July 16, when pups have left dens and are more mobile, ranchers can have direct access to collar data if they sign an agreement to keep the information to themselves. The department has given no indication the policy will change this year.

“I think Tom’s right. The information should be put other there,” Stevens County Cattlemen’s Association President Scott Nielsen said in an interview. “They (Fish and Wildlife) may have some individual ranchers who are satisfied. I can tell you, I don’t know any of them.”

Bill McIrvine, a partner in

the Diamond M Ranch in northeast Washington, said the family-owned operation isn’t getting information from the department about the whereabouts of wolves. “We are not, and we never have,” he said.

Diamond M was accused by a Washington State University professor in 2016 of provoking attacks on cattle by placing salt blocks near a den. WSU officials repudiated the comments, saying the claim had no basis in fact and that the ranch didn’t know where the den was when it released cattle.

McIrvine said knowing that the den was there could have saved the ranch “a lot of heartache.”

“We would not have put the salt there if we had known because we wouldn’t want to have held cows where the den site was,” he said.

Diamond M has not signed an agreement with Fish and Wildlife to get collar data after the black-out period. The agreement was too intrusive, McIrvine said.

He also said the collars allow Fish and Wildlife to name packs, focusing attention on the fate of packs rather than reducing conflicts in specific areas.

“Collars kind of keep everybody stirred up,” he said. “The wolves aren’t the problem, it’s the bureaucracy around the wolves that are the problem.”



Courtesy Bureau of Reclamation

The Klamath Basin.

Bureau of Reclamation issues new three-year plan for Klamath River

By GEORGE PLAVERN
Capital Press

KLAMATH FALLS, Ore. — The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation has issued a new three-year operating plan for the Klamath River, dedicating more water for endangered salmon while avoiding a “worst case scenario” for farmers and ranchers.

In exchange, a local tribe and fishing groups agreed to suspend a lawsuit filed against the agency in 2019 and withdrew their motion for a preliminary injunction that sought even more water — up to 50,000 acre-feet — to protect the fish from drought and disease.

Management plans, otherwise known as Biological Opinions or BiOps, are required under the federal Endangered Species Act to preserve threatened or endangered species, such as Klamath River coho salmon which were listed as threatened in 1997.

Last year, the Bureau of Reclamation issued a new five-year BiOp for the Klamath River working with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and National Marine Fisheries Service. The Yurok Tribe, Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen’s Associations and the Institute for Fisheries Resources objected, arguing the plan did not do enough to reverse declining fish runs.

The groups sued in July 2019, while at the same time the Klamath Irrigation District and Klamath Water Users Association also sued on opposite grounds, claiming the BiOp took too much water from farms and putting the region’s agriculture in a precarious situation.

However, the plan was ultimately scrapped in November 2019 when the bureau said it had previously received “erroneous information” from an outside source. The agencies scrambled to revise the BiOp ahead of the 2020 irrigation season, and hoped to complete their review by March 31.

Instead, the three-year interim plan will buy them more time to develop a longer-term BiOp without the looming threat of legal action.

In a joint statement, the Yurok Tribe and fishing groups said the interim BiOp “allocates more water for river flows in most hydrologic years to help the salmon,” allowing the groups to temporarily halt the lawsuit and withdraw their request for a preliminary injunction.

“We will always stand up and fight for our river and our people, because salmon are our lifeline,” said Frankie Myers, vice chairman of the Yurok Tribe in northern California. “Our salmon and the Yurok people have suffered from mismanagement of the river, low flows and devastating disease outbreaks, and time is running out.”

Glen Spain, Northwest regional director for the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen’s Associations and Institute for Fisheries Resources, said restoring salmon runs in the Klamath River benefits everyone.

“We needed to bring this lawsuit and it succeeded in helping salmon in the short-term,” Spain said. “Now we can turn to working together on longer-term river restoration.”

Washington snowpack looks good

By DAN WHEAT
For the Capital Press

YAKIMA, Wash. — Irrigation water has begun flowing at lower Yakima Valley farms, and there should be plenty through the growing season because of good snowpack in the Cascade Range.

Last year, moderate drought resulted in restrictions on junior water right holders and some crop losses.

Washington’s statewide snowpack was 104% of normal on March 30 compared to 47% on Dec. 27 and 80% a year ago, according to the U.S. Natural Resources Conservation Service.

“Things are looking good considering how the season started out. Some people were ready to declare drought on Jan. 1,” said Scott Pattee, the NRCS state water supply specialist in Mount Vernon.

Twice the normal amount of snowfall in January turned things around and enough snow continued in February and March to maintain a slightly above normal snowpack, Pattee said.

But adequacy of low elevation snow is questionable in the Yakima Basin, said Chris Lynch, hydrologist at the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation in Yakima.

Lower elevation snowpack is not good, and it’s hard

to get an accurate reading because SNOTEL sites are at higher elevations, Lynch said.

Overall, the situation is much better than early January or than last year, he said.

A mid-March storm dumped 33 inches of snow at Mission Ridge Ski Area south of Wenatchee. The nearest NRCS SNOTEL snow telemetry site at Upper Wheeler Ridge recorded 24 inches. The same storm provided heavy snow on the north side of the Olympic Mountains, which will irrigate Elwah and Dungeness farmlands.

“Port Angeles and Sequim got more low elevation snow this year than any place in the state,” Pattee said.

While closing offices to the public and making other logistical changes due to the coronavirus, Central Washington irrigation districts are planning normal seasonal startups.

The 72,000-acre Roza Irrigation District, in the Yakima Valley, began charging its 95 miles of canals and 350 miles of laterals with water from the Yakima River on March 16 and began deliveries March 20. It was closer to normal timing than last year, which was late because of late storms leaving snow in canals.

Kittitas Reclamation District, in the upper Yakima Basin, plans to begin water deliveries on April 15.

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