

State wolf population increases 15% in 2019

Ranchers say wolf attack number is larger than reported

By **GEORGE PLAVERN**
Capital Press

SALEM — Oregon's wolf population continued to rise in 2019 while the number of confirmed attacks on livestock fell by nearly half, according to state wildlife officials.

Ranchers in rural Oregon, however, say the number of "confirmed" wolf attacks is nowhere near the actual number, and many producers have simply given up reporting cases of dead or missing livestock after growing frustrated with how the predators are being managed.

The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife released its annual wolf report Wednesday, documenting at least 158 wolves statewide. That is a 15% increase over 2018, when biologists counted 137 wolves.

Oregon now has 22 established wolfpacks, up from 16 the previous year. A pack is defined as four or more wolves traveling together during winter. State fish and wildlife also identified nine other distinct groups of 2-3 wolves that do not meet the strict definition of a pack.

Most wolves are densely clustered in northeast Oregon, with a few packs spreading into the northern and southern Cascades. State fish and wildlife says the total wolf population is likely higher, and the annual survey is only a minimum count based on verified evidence such as visual sightings, tracks and photos taken by remote trail cameras.

The number of wolves in Oregon has steadily risen since counting began in 2009, when fewer than 20 animals were identified. Gray wolves are still listed as a federally endangered species in western Oregon, though they were removed from the state



Two adult wolves from the Walla Walla pack in northern Umatilla County.

endangered species list east of highways 395, 78 and 95 in 2015.

Roblyn Brown, state fish and wildlife wolf coordinator, said wolves are expanding their range with three new packs in the Blue Mountains of Eastern Oregon, south of Interstate 84. In western Oregon, the Indigo pack was also

livestock fell 43% in 2019. State fish and wildlife staff investigated 50 possible cases of wolf-livestock depredation, with 16 incidents confirmed, one "probable," 12 possible or unknown and 21 non-wolf related. Overall, ranchers lost one adult cow, one steer, 11 calves, six sheep and one guard dog to wolves.

co-exist with wolves."

Danielle Moser, wildlife program coordinator for Oregon Wild, a Portland-based environmental group, said figures in the 2019 state fish and wildlife wolf report are "more strong evidence that focusing on non-lethal measures to reduce wolf-livestock conflict works."

But the Oregon Cattlemen's Association disputed the state's numbers, and argues that more wolves will continue to pose problems for ranchers going forward.

Jerome Rosa, the association's executive director, said ranchers are increasingly not reporting dead or missing livestock to state fish and wildlife. In some cases, Rosa said, it takes biologists days to arrive for an inspection. By that time, he said the evidence is too far degraded to get a confirmation.

"(Ranchers) gave up on the system," Rosa said. "The frustration out there on the countryside has just gotten higher."

Rodger Huffman and Veril Nelson, co-chairmen of the cattlemen's association wolf committee, released a joint

statement saying ranchers do everything they can to prevent wolves from killing livestock — usually at a cost to their own mental and financial stress — and is "more a matter of survival than attempts to co-exist."

"We also know that 'confirmed' losses of livestock are nowhere near the actual losses, both by death and other losses wolves in livestock indirectly contribute to," Huffman and Nelson said. "When government regulation and management do little or nothing when there are rare confirmations, we know producers quit reporting."

The state awarded \$178,319 to ranchers in 11 counties to compensate them for livestock losses, as well as for non-lethal deterrents such as fladry fencing, alarm boxes or range riders.

Huffman and Nelson said the compensation program is

"severely underfunded," and discourages ranchers from participating due to its complexity and, ultimately, small percentage of payouts to help ranchers stay in business.

While the wolf population is increasing, one of Oregon's most famous wolves, OR-7, may be dead.

The famous wandering wolf and breeding male of the Rogue pack was photographed in the fall but not documented during the winter count, state fish and wildlife said. His mate is still present, though the pack apparently did not reproduce in 2019. OR-7 is estimated to be 11 years old.

"We don't know if OR-7 has died, but it would be reasonable to assume considering his age, which is old for a wolf in the wild," Brown said. "It is natural for packs to change over time as individual wolves are born, disperse or die."

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officially confirmed in eastern Lane and Douglas counties.

No wolves were poached in 2019, though five were struck and killed by vehicles and another died from disease. A rancher in Baker County also legally shot a wolf he caught in the act of chasing a herding dog on his ranch near Halfway in March.

Meanwhile, the number of confirmed wolf attacks on

Brown said she is impressed with ranchers' ingenuity as they implement new non-lethal tools to protect their livestock without harming wolves.

"The wolf population continues to expand into areas where livestock producers have less experience with wolves," Brown said. "We appreciate all livestock producers for their efforts to

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