

New report shows wolf population continues to grow

By **GEORGE PLAVERN**
Capital Press

SALEM — Oregon's gray wolf population continued to climb in 2020, with at least 173 individuals documented by year's end, according to state wildlife officials.

The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife released its annual Wolf Conservation and Management report Wednesday, which includes a minimum known count based on verified evidence such as tracks, sightings and remote camera photographs.

The 2020 population showed a 9.5% increase over the end of 2019, when the state recorded at least 158 wolves.

Wolves started returning to Oregon in 1999 following campaigns decades earlier to eradicate the species across the West. The Wenaha Pack was the first to become reestablished in the far northeast corner of Oregon in 2008, and the population has been slowly but steadily rising every year over the past decade.

"While Northeast Oregon continues to host the majority of the state's wolf population, dispersal to other parts of Oregon and adjacent states continues," said Roblyn Brown, the Department of Fish and Wildlife's wolf program coordinator.

A total of 22 packs were also documented in 2020, the same number as in 2019. Of those, 17 qualified as breeding pairs, having an adult male and adult female with at least two pups that survived to Dec. 31.

Under the department's wolf plan, management is divided into eastern and western zones. In Eastern Oregon, wolves now fall under phase III of the plan, which means the population has reached at least seven breeding pairs for three consecutive years.

West of highways 395, 78 and 95, wolves are still under phase I of the plan, and will not move into phase II until there are four breeding pairs for three consecutive years.

The different phases determine how local wildlife biologists and ranchers may respond to wolves that habitually prey on livestock — a standard known as chronic depredation. Chronic depredation in phase I is defined as four confirmed attacks on livestock in six months, after which the Department of Fish and Wildlife can consider killing problem wolves. In phases II and III, chronic depredation changes to two confirmed kills in nine months.

All phases require ranchers to use non-lethal deterrents to haze wolves away from their herds, such as range riders, flashing lights or alarm boxes.

ODFW confirmed 31 livestock depredations in 2020, up 94% from 2019. However, 16 of those were attributed to the Rogue Pack, whose range straddles Jackson and



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Roblyn Brown | state wolf program coordinator

Klamath counties in southwest Oregon.

While the Department of Fish and Wildlife removed wolves from the state endangered species list in 2015, gray wolves remained federally protected in western Oregon during all of 2020.

Over the course of 99 days between July 30 and Nov. 25, the department partnered with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and USDA Wildlife Services to limit depredations by the Rogue Pack, including coordinated nighttime patrols to haze wolves out of livestock pastures in the Wood River Valley.

"The personnel costs of this collaboration were significant during the four months," Brown said. "We appreciate the work of our partners and all livestock producers for their efforts to coexist with wolves."

Despite those efforts, wolves continued to prey on cattle in the area.

Ranchers may be compensated for wolf-livestock losses from the Oregon Department of Agriculture's Wolf Depredation Compensation and Financial Assistance Grant Program. The department awarded \$251,529 to 12 counties in 2020, up from \$178,319 awarded in 2019. The program also helps pay for purchasing and implementing non-lethal deterrents.

Gray wolves were officially removed from the federal Endangered Species Act across the Lower 48 states in January under a rule finalized by the Trump administration. Six environmental groups have since sued to overturn the delisting.

Sristi Kamal, senior Oregon representa-

tive for the group Defenders of Wildlife, said increasing wolf numbers are encouraging, though long-term recovery is still dependent on addressing multiple threats including poaching and pushes for predator control measures.

"We have an opportunity in Oregon to ensure habitat connectivity and establish a landscape where wolves and people are both able to flourish," Kamal said in a statement. "Defenders of Wildlife is committed to working with agency staff, landowners and ranchers to make this happen."

There were seven human-caused wolf mortalities in Oregon in 2020, according to the Department of Fish and Wildlife. One wolf was hit by a vehicle on Interstate 84, and another was hit by a boat while swimming across the Snake River.

Four wolves were illegally poached, and three cases are still under investigation.

The breeding male of the Ruckel Ridge Pack was shot in Umatilla County in May. The breeding male of the Cornucopia Pack was shot in September in Baker County. A subadult wolf, believed to be from the Pine Creek Pack, was shot in October in Baker County.

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