

Conservationists call for action on wolf poaching

BY NICHOLAS K. GERANIOS

The Associated Press

SPOKANE, Wash. — Wildlife advocates say there has been a distressing uptick in wolf poaching cases in the Northwest in the past year and a half.

Four dead wolves were discovered in the northeastern corner of Washington state in February. That followed the poisoning of eight wolves in Eastern Oregon in 2021, along with the poaching of a total of eight wolves in Idaho last year.

While the numbers are small, they are a big jump over previous years. Oregon had a total of 10 confirmed wolf poachings between 2017-2020. Washington had no confirmed wolf poachings from 2017-2021. Data for 2017-2019 was not available for Idaho, but the state had three confirmed wolf poachings in 2020.

Wolf experts say the actual number of poaching incidents is likely much higher. The cases are difficult to solve because they occur in remote, rural areas where a perpetrator can kill a wolf and bury the body.

“The term ‘shoot, shovel and shut up’ is what gets thrown around a lot and from my conversations it seems to be pretty engrained in these communities,” said Sophia Ressler of the Center for Biological Diversity, which compiled the numbers.

“There is actually science that shows for every confirmed poaching there are likely several additional,” Ressler said.

In the Washington case, deputies from the Stevens County Sheriff’s Office discovered four dead wolves on Feb. 18.

The incident report did not find any evidence of bullet holes or physical trauma to the wolves, which suggested their deaths may have



Three wolves from the Walla Walla pack in Umatilla County, photographed by remote camera in 2017.

Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife/Contributed Photo

been the result of poisoning.

No arrests have been made in the case, despite conservation groups offering a \$30,000 reward for information leading to a conviction.

The dead wolves were all in the territory of the Wedge Pack, which has been exterminated twice for preying on cattle. But new packs keep forming in what is prime wolf habitat.

Wolves were exterminated in Washington early in the last century at the behest of the cattle industry. Since wolves returned to the state in 2008, there have been numerous conflicts with ranchers.

There were a minimum of

206 wolves and 33 packs in Washington state in 2021, according to an annual survey conducted by state and tribal biologists. Idaho has about 1,500 wolves, while Oregon has about 173.

The Washington case is “pretty distressing and alarming,” said Julia Smith, wolf policy lead for the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. But the number of wolf poaching incidents is still small, she said.

The agency knows that there are a number of undetected wolf poachings, but the numbers must be small because the total number of wolves keep increasing, Smith said.

Conservationists are outraged about the poisoning of wolves.

“Putting poison out on the landscape for any unsuspecting creature to feed on is one of the most loathsome things a person can do,” said Brooks Fahy, executive director of Predator Defense, a national nonprofit advocacy group. “It’s not just about killing wolves. It’s also about wanting them to suffer.”

Steph Taylor, president of Speak for Wolves, said Washington has a poaching problem and wildlife managers “need to step up their game in holding these disturbed poachers accountable. Otherwise, this shoot, shovel, shut up culture

will continue to thrive.”

Meanwhile, Oregon wildlife troopers found eight dead wolves between February and July of 2021 in the northeastern part of the state. The animals were poisoned, but the deaths remain unsolved.

Last December, Oregon State Police announced they had exhausted all leads in the case and pleaded with the public for help. A \$36,000 reward has been posted for information that leads to an arrest.

The Oregon deaths last year included all five wolves from the Catherine Creek Pack, found southeast of Mount Harris, plus three wolves from other packs.

In late 2020, the Trump administration removed gray wolves from the endangered list and stripped their legal protections, citing “the successful recovery of the gray wolf.” But in February 2022, the Biden administration restored federal protection for gray wolves in most of the lower 48 states. The decision to re-list gray wolves was hailed as a major conservation victory for the species.

Ressler, an attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity, said the poaching cases must be solved.

“If poachers are allowed to get off scot-free, it only encourages them to kill again,” she said.

U.S. testing new fire retardant, critics push other methods

BY KEITH RIDLER

Associated Press

BOISE — U.S. officials are testing a new wildfire retardant after two decades of buying millions of gallons annually from one supplier, but watchdogs say the expensive strategy is overly fixated on aerial attacks at the expense of hiring more fire-line digging ground crews.

The Forest Service used more than 50 million gallons of retardant for the first time in 2020 as increasingly destructive wildfires plague the West. It exceeded 50 million gallons again last year to fight some of the largest and longest-duration wildfires in history in California and other states. The fire retardant cost those two years reached nearly \$200 million.

Over the previous 10 years, the agency used 30 million gallons annually.

“No two wildfires are the same, and thus it’s critical for fire managers to have different tools available to them for different circumstances a fire may present,” the Forest Service said in an email. “Fire retardant is simply one of those tools.”

The Forest Service said tests started last summer are continuing this summer with a magnesium-chloride-based retardant from Fortress.

Fortress contends its retardants are effective and better for the environment than products offered by Perimeter Solutions. That company says its ammonium-phosphate-based retardants are superior.

Fortress started in 2014 with mainly former wildland firefighters who aimed to create a more effective fire retardant that’s better for the environment. It has facilities in California, Montana and Wyoming, and describes itself as the only alternative to fertilizer-based fire retardants.

The company is headed by Chief Executive Officer Bob Burnham, who started his career as a hotshot crew member fighting wildfires and ultimately rose to become a Type 1 incident commander, directing hundreds of firefighters against some of the nation’s largest wildfires. He often called in aircraft to disperse plumes of red fire retardant,



Joe Kline/EO Media Group, File

A single-engine air tanker drops a load of retardant at the Prineville Airport during a demonstration in 2015.

a decision he said he wonders about now after learning more about fertilizer-based retardants and developing a new retardant.

“This new fire retardant is better,” he said. “It’s going to be a lot less damaging to our sensitive planet resources, and it’s going to be a lot better fire retardant on the ground.”

The main ingredient in Fortress products, magnesium chloride, is extracted from the Great Salt Lake in Utah,

a method and process the company says is more environmentally friendly and less greenhouse-gas producing than mining and processing phosphate. The Forest Service last summer tested the company’s FR-100, and this summer said it will test a version called FR-200.

Perimeter Solutions, which has facilities and equipment throughout the West, has had a number of name and ownership changes over the years

but has dominated the market for more than two decades. The company’s Phos-Chek LC-95A is the world’s most used fire retardant. The company is transitioning to a new retardant called Phos-Chek LCE20-Fx, which the company said is made out of food-grade ingredients, making it a cleaner product.

“We’re certain that the products that we make are the safest, most effective, most environmentally friendly

products available,” said Chief Executive Officer Edward Goldberg. “We’ve spent decades in partnership with the (Forest Service).”

Phosphate is mined in multiple places. Goldberg said they get phosphate both domestically, including from Idaho, and internationally. He declined to go into detail, but said the company hasn’t relied on China or Ukraine, and has substituted other suppliers for Russia and Belarus.

The Forest Service said that tests this summer with FR-200 will be limited to single-engine airtankers flying out of an airtanker base in Roman, Montana. That appears to be to prevent mixing the companies’ retardants.

Two Forest Service watchdog groups contend both types of retardant harm the environment, and that the agency should be spending less on retardant and more on firefighters.

Andy Stahl, executive director of the Forest Service Employees for Environmental Ethics, and Timothy Ingalls, executive director of Firefighters United for Safety, Ethics, and Ecology, both said that the ammonium-phosphate-based retardant is essentially a fertilizer that can boost invasive plants and is potentially responsible for some algae blooms in lakes or reservoirs when it washes downstream. They said the

magnesium-chloride-based retardant is essentially a salt that will inhibit plant growth where it falls, possibly harming threatened species.

Both are concerned about direct hits to waterways with either retardant and potential harm to aquatic species. Aircraft are typically limited to giving streams a 300-foot buffer from retardant, but the Forest Service allows drops within the buffer under some conditions, and they sometimes happen accidentally.

“Their theory is that it’s a war, and when you’re in a war you’re going to have collateral damage,” Stahl said. “It’s the fire-industrial complex, the nexus between corporate and government agencies combined, with really no interest in ending making warfare on wildfires. It’s ever-increasing.”

Currently, much of the West is in drought. The National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho, is reporting that so far this year there have been more than 31,000 wildfires that have burned about 5,000 square miles. That’s well above the 10-year average for the same period of about 24,000 wildfires and 2,000 square miles burned.

Wildfire seasons have become increasingly longer as climate change has made the West much warmer and drier in the past 30 years, and scientists have long warned that the weather will get wilder as the world warms.

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