

Environmental groups oppose \$1M wolf compensation bill

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

SALEM — Environmental groups oppose providing Oregon ranchers with an additional \$1 million in compensation for wolf problems, arguing the bill sends a bad message about the predators.

Supporters of House Bill 4127 counter that as wolves spread across the state, it's necessary to devote more money to pay ranchers for lost livestock and for preventive measures.

"We need to ensure this fund doesn't go dry," said Rep. Bobby Levy, R-Echo, referring to the Wolf Management Compensation and Proactive Trust Fund created in 2011.

"We have over twice as many confirmed depredations as we saw in 2020," Levy said, noting that wolves killed 41 cows, 23 sheep, 9 goats and a guard dog last year.

Based on previous levels of compensation, that means ranchers would need more than \$750,000 in compensation for last year's confirmed losses, she said.

For the current biennium, Oregon has \$400,000 per year in federal and state money authorized for wolf compensation, said Jonathan Sandau, special assistant to the director at the Oregon Department of Agriculture.

On average over the past three years, the wolf compensation fund has annually received \$425,000 in requests and paid out \$185,000, Sandau said.

At least 30% of the funds must be dedicated to prevention, but usually that proportion is much higher, hovering at about 70% per year, he said.

Coalitions of environmental nonprofit groups have come out against HB 4127, saying it will provide funds for missing livestock not necessarily killed by wolves.

The Oregon Conservation Network, a coalition of 30 organizations, opposes "throwing more money at missing livestock," partly because it will conflate wayward animals with wolf depredations, said Julie McGraw, the network's representative at a recent House Agriculture, Land Use and Water Committee hearing.

"The more it appears that wolves are killing livestock, the worse it is going to be in terms of the quality of the relationship with people trying to raise livestock," she said.

The number of livestock that have allegedly gone missing due to wolves far surpasses the number of confirmed depredations, said Julie Moser, wildlife program coordinator for the Oregon Wild nonprofit.

Meanwhile, livestock go missing for any number of reasons, so those claims for compensation aren't verifiable, Moser said.

"Blaming wolves for any unaccounted livestock not only superficially inflates wolf-livestock conflict but it perpetuates a problematic stigma about wolves," she said.

Critics of the bill also argued the wolf compensation fund is prone to misuse and should be reformed, while adding more money to it will create a "moral hazard" by encouraging ranchers not to look for missing animals.

"Making the fund easier to abuse is not a solution," said Bethany Cotton, conservation director for the Cascadia Wildlands nonprofit.

The bill's supporters pointed out that despite the critics' focus on missing livestock, the added funding would go to the wolf compensation program as a whole.

"There's a lot of conjecture on this, but there are really no facts," said Rep. David Brock-Smith, R-Port Orford.

With wolf depredations reaching a record level in 2021, it's worth adequately funding the wolf compensation program to encourage acceptance of state policies for the species, said Rep. Mark Owens, R-Crane.

"It's a trend that's starting to possibly erode the social tolerance we started to develop with the wolf management plan," Owens said of rising depredations. "Nothing in this bill changes the wolf management plan. Nothing in this bill harms wolves. In fact, this bill is there to support that social tolerance of wolf interactions with our public."

Wolves cause problems for the livestock industry that go beyond depredations, such as lower conception rates and weight loss, said Todd Nash, president of the Oregon Cattlemen's Association and a Wallowa County commissioner.

"If we paid for the missing livestock and the confirmed depredations, it wouldn't come close to capturing the cost incurred by ranchers," Nash said. "If there's going to be fraud in the system, the fraud is that we have a compensation system and there are not funds available."

Oregon ranchers decry wolf ruling

By GEORGE PAVEN
Capital Press

SALEM — A federal judge's decision to renew endangered species protections for some gray wolves in the Lower 48 states is drawing criticism from Oregon ranchers who say they feel defenseless to protect their livestock from chronic attacks.

Environmental groups sued the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and former Interior Secretary David Bernhardt after the Trump administration removed wolves from the endangered species list in 2020, arguing the delisting was premature.

U.S. District Judge Jeffrey White ruled in favor of the plaintiffs on Feb. 10.

"Restoring federal protections means that these vitally important animals will receive the necessary support to recover and thrive in the years ahead," said Jamie Rappaport Clark, president and CEO of Defenders of Wildlife, one of six groups that filed the lawsuit.

Oregon's minimum wolf population was 173 at the end of 2020. An updated estimate from the state Department of Fish & Wildlife is expected later this spring.

The Oregon Cattlemen's Association, which represents ranchers statewide, released a statement blasting the ruling.

OCA President Todd Nash said that while environmental groups such as Defenders of Wildlife and the Center for Biological Diversity have seats at the table for developing Oregon's Wolf Conservation and Management Plan, "they are never satisfied with the brokered compromises."

Gray wolves were reintroduced in Central Idaho and Yellowstone National Park in the mid-1990s, and since then the species has expanded both in population and geographical area beyond expectations, Nash said.

"This decision to re-list beyond that experimental area builds mistrust in our legal system and compromises the integrity of the Endangered Species Act," Nash said.

The ruling does not cover wolves in Eastern Oregon, where the majority of packs are. State wildlife officials will continue to manage wolves east of highways



ODFW

Wolves caught by an Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife trail camera.

395, 78 and 95.

Wolves in the western two-thirds of Oregon, however, will be returned to the federal ESA — including the Rogue pack, which was responsible for more than half of all confirmed wolf attacks on livestock in 2020.

Veril Nelson, a cattle rancher in Oakland and co-chair of the OCA Wolf Committee, said producers are frustrated by the about-face in wolf management.

"The bottom line is, we're hung out to dry," Nelson said. "Our options are very few."

Upon delisting, wolves in Western Oregon were placed under Phase I of the state wolf plan, which allows for killing wolves in defense of livestock in limited circumstances.

Wolves could be killed if caught in the act of chasing or biting livestock, or if a pack incurred four "qualifying" depredations in a six-month period. To qualify, ranchers must be using some kind of non-lethal deterrents — such as range riders — and remove all carcasses or bone piles that might attract wolves.

With federal protections back in place, those options are now off the table, Nelson said, adding that non-lethal tools are not 100% effective and costly to maintain.

"How many range riders do you need to cover 40,000 acres? It's not doable," he said. "You can be out there and do the best you can, but all of those things cost money."

OCA is supporting House Bill 4127 in the Legislature that would provide an additional \$1 million for the state's wolf compensation fund to reimburse ranchers for dead and missing livestock, as well as non-lethal prevention. A public hearing for the bill was held Feb. 9.

Jonathan Sandau, a special assistant to the director at the Oregon Department of Agriculture, said the wolf compensation fund has annually received on average \$425,000 in requests from ranchers, while paying out just \$185,000.

Critics argued the wolf compensation fund is prone to misuse, and increasing funding may encourage ranchers not to look for missing animals but instead default to blaming wolves



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