



WASHINGTON ASSOCIATION OF CONSERVATION DISTRICTS

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WACD Position Paper – Wolf Task Force FINAL

The Washington Association of Conservation Districts (WACD) supports and encourages the wise use and management of all natural resources that results in a healthy sustainable environment and economy for the future of the state and its citizens, including those who depend on forestland and rangeland resources. WACD represents forty-seven conservation districts in the State of Washington, who provide programs and services for our state's working landowners and operators in natural resource conservation. In 2012, WACD established a **Wolf Task Force** in response to two resolutions from WACD membership requesting action on the issue of introduction of the Gray Wolf. WACD directed the task force to report on the impacts to conservation of natural resources, land use management and the economic viability of land users in the State of Washington by the continued state listing of the Northern Gray Wolf as a threatened and/or endangered (T&E) species, despite federal delisting in the eastern third of the state (*the federal delisting covers all lands east of US HWY 395*).

The WACD Wolf Task Force has prepared this position paper which, in summary, supports the wolf's immediate regional delisting and a progression to statewide removal from the state T&E Species List, and outlines information materials and response options for our conservation district members, partners, employees and cooperators to consider in providing a meaningful and effective response to cooperators who experience interactions with wolves, and who must deal with the impacts of wolves and other apex predators on natural resource conservation issues and programs.

WACD supports the efforts and methods developed by various groups (i.e. Washington Cattlemen's Association and Cattle Producers of Washington) who have requested the delisting and immediate move to management status of the Introduced Gray Wolf by the Washington State Fish and Wildlife (WSFW) Commission.

Further, WACD supports the State of Washington moving to regional delisting followed by statewide delisting from Washington State's endangered species list. Regional delisting may be accomplished by the Washington State Legislature or by the WSFW Commission should they elect to modify the appropriate Washington Administrative Code's (WAC's). Each phase of down-listing or delisting may take the agency 18 months to complete.

The following is a list of specific conservation and landowner concerns supporting WACD's position related to the current implementation of Washington State's gray wolf management/recovery plan and the impacts that will be experienced on working lands (private & public):

- The best science strongly supports the US Fish and Wildlife Service’s conclusion that the northern Rocky Mountain population is biologically recovered. It contains over 1,650 wolves, 244 packs and over 110 successfully breeding pairs. It has exceeded recovery goals for 11 consecutive years, occupies nearly the entire suitable habitat in the northern Rocky Mountains, is at or above long-term carrying capacity, and has high levels of genetic diversity and gene flow throughout the region. (*USFWS Gray Wolf Recovery and Delisting Q & A, May 2011*).
- WACD believes that the “Cascade Mountain Wolf” was native to the state. This species is extinct. This animal’s habitat needs and food sources were uniquely different than those of the Northern Gray Wolf. The history of wolf presence in the State of Washington is limited and does not truly identify the Northern Gray Wolf as present. Therefore, the Northern Gray Wolf should be considered an *invasive* species not suitable to the habitat provided throughout the State of Washington.
- The current Wolf Recovery Plan relies upon the unwarranted and unauthorized use of private lands to provide much of the habitat identified for this species, as well as upon increased management expenses that are incurred by the working landowner or operator.
- The use of private lands by apex predators has the potential for conflict (as demonstrated in other states) with current land management uses (private and public), economies (agricultural, sporting and governmental) culture and custom. The appropriation of private lands is occurring without regard, respect or adequate compensation to the private landowners of Washington.
- The Wolf Recovery Plan does not provide assurances that negatively affected landowners or the public will remain whole, but who are, in fact, by virtue of its contents required to sacrifice their assets and/or resources. These include economic/financial gains, emotional well-being, and current land use and conservation practices to protect natural resources and property.

The gray wolf impacts the agricultural and forestry habitats and economies of the state by the following:

- In Washington State, the livestock industry is dependent upon healthy working lands - both large and small, and both public and privately held tracts - to provide grazing. *It should be noted that these working land managers are the best rangeland conservationists.* If the landowner is not able to remain economically viable, due to the negative impact of the Northern Gray Wolf, these tracts of land will be sold to the next best use, most likely a sub-division which will cause exponentially greater adverse natural resource impacts.

- Direct impacts due to predation of livestock.
- Indirect impacts due to predation of ungulates.
 - Wolf predation of ungulates (deer, elk and others) causes them to shift their grazing behavior, which has been shown to negatively impact livestock producers' ability to protect natural resources through conservation practices, such as to adhere to a rotational grazing plan (that may be required under a conservation plan and cost-share program contracts).
 - Harassment and predation of ungulates forces these populations to move from the rangeland and forested habitat to feed on high value commercial crops grown on land used for agricultural production.
 - The harassment of wild herbivores forces movement from desired forested cover into young reforestation units/forest tree plantations that are vulnerable to foraging damage. Such forced movements in neighboring states have been shown to have adverse impacts on all affected wildlife and associated habitat.
 - Harassment of livestock results in reduced productivity due to inefficient grazing. This can result in grasses being over-grazed in some areas, placing producers out of compliance with required management plans, and under-grazing in other areas, leading to competition for young trees as well as increased fire danger from fine fuels loading. Increased fine fuels mean that fires spread more quickly with increasing intensity, potentially doing more long-term damage to the resource.
 - Increased grazing pressure from all species trying to avoid predation can result in destabilization of the rangeland and riparian areas, leading to resource damage and impacts to existing conservation practices.
- Economic destabilization of livestock and wildlife enterprises may result in severe financial hardship and inability of land users to afford implementation of natural resource conserving practices. Neighboring states have shown increasing costs associated with actions needed to protect livestock, but resulting in very low success rates. When faced with increasing costs and limited resources, a producer's efforts at conservation often suffer first (e.g., less effective pasture utilization). This effect is worse when livestock producers are forced into "survival mode" protecting animals from wolf attacks. Considering the amount of high-quality conservation work performed by landowners and conservation districts on private, working lands of this type, this

poses a very real threat to our ability to maintain conservation of these natural resources.

- Harassment's negative consequences include additional stress to livestock resulting in a variety of undesirable situations, such as weight loss, price reduction at market due to unsettled and fearful animals, reduced conception rates, reduced breeding cycles, and abortion. **All of these impacts have important negative economic consequences.**
- Predictable adverse economic impacts can occur to the hunting/fishing/sporting industries if rangeland grazing is lost and is replaced by development. Habitat will be reduced and today's opportunities for hunting, fishing and other recreational opportunities will be eliminated.
- It is documented that game herds have been negatively impacted where wolves are present.
- Even though the WDFW includes all lands within the state in the habitat or core areas, it is unclear if the other governments (tribal) have been contacted and what their decision is in regards to participating. Without full cooperation and participation, delisting and management will be unnecessarily delayed because of inaccuracies in animal counts and other data.
- Planning for singular specie (in this case the Northern Grey Wolf), without consideration of other managed species such as the Mountain Caribou, Sage Grouse and Big Horn Sheep, will result in direct threats to those other species.
- Failure to properly manage an apex predator in managed ecosystems results in the degradation of that ecosystem.

WACD supports the development of a comprehensive package of information and tools that can be made available to landowners and cooperators through conservation districts to mitigate or minimize the impacts associated with wolf introduction and the management of working lands impacted by wolf encounters. These may include (but are not limited to):

- Educational information about the Northern Gray Wolf for distribution to conservation districts, partners and cooperators.
- Sources of information about conservation programs and services available to assist cooperators. This includes a careful evaluation of conservation programs and land management requirements to determine how programs and services are affected by wolf-related issues (e.g., rotational grazing).

- Reliable and up-to-date contacts for reporting and responding to wolf interactions, including state and federal government agencies, and local officials.
 - WDFW state, regional and local personnel
 - USDA APHIS Wildlife Services
 - Olympia office
 - Moses Lake office
 - USFWS
 - Eastern Division (for compensation inquiries)
 - County Sherriff
 - Local Veterinarian

- Sources of funding available to assist producers in dealing with management costs and other activities.
 - USDA/Wildlife Services livestock loss prevention grant
 - WDFW
 - Other sources

- Recommended practices to mitigate or manage impacts. This requires an exhaustive review of conservation practices to determine which might be effective in assisting producers, which are altogether lacking, which require modification, and which new practices need to be developed and included in programs and services (e.g., range-rider).

Beyond the toolbox that should be available to conservation districts to assist landowners and producers, there is the question of what a conservation district can do to help the customer walking in the door or calling about wolf predation or other problem. When a cooperator contacts the conservation districts with a wolf interaction problem, perhaps the most important service the district can provide is to assist the cooperator in verifying and documenting wolf depredation or other activities where these are reported to have occurred. Conservation district staff can participate in an investigation of wolf activity, together with local and other governmental personnel, and can support a landowner by providing information about existing practices on the property. In order for conservation districts to provide such a service, districts will need to secure funding to cover costs associated with the technical services provided, and will require the appropriate technical and investigative training. While the district can help the landowner by providing detailed information on contacts, the landowner bears the responsibility to contact necessary parties.

Another service the conservation district may provide is to research available conservation practices, programs, services and grants and make that information available to the cooperator. A conservation district may also document the need for certain conservation practices or information where practices are found to be lacking, that can be passed along to partners and research personnel for development. Where practices are found wanting, WACD supports the

establishment of appropriate practices and their inclusion in conservation financial and technical assistance programs.

WACD supports work by all conservation districts to communicate with and work with other organizations in the conservation community, to improve dialogue and understanding on the issue, and to address questions or concerns that may arise. WACD recognizes the need for association leadership on the issue.

WACD requests that conservation partners and other agencies undertake the aforementioned evaluation of their conservation programs, services and requirements, to determine the effects this issue has on delivery of technical and financial services, conservation planning, compliance and program interaction, and make any adjustments or corrections warranted. If it is found that adequate practices do not exist with which to assist working landowners and operators, that, in itself, will be a critical piece of information for decision-makers to consider.

WACD further requests that agencies work together, to ensure that their programs respond consistently and uniformly to wolf/landowner interactions, so that landowners do not face conflicting agency responses to management questions. For example, where rotational grazing is a requirement of a landowner's conservation plan, lease or contract, wolf interactions may lead to a landowner's failure to maintain the required rotational grazing elements. It is important that the agencies involved do not respond in a conflicting manner (e.g., one agency agreeing to modify a plan, another cancelling it).

Finally, this report is intended to provide an adequate, though not comprehensive, statement of problems landowners and producers encounter associated with continued state listing of the Northern Gray Wolf as a threatened and/or endangered species, and to indicate consequences and needed actions dealing with the conservation of natural resources on the lands involved as a result of the presence and activities of the wolf. The report is further intended to assist conservation districts, partners and cooperators by outlining what may be needed to fulfill our obligation and desire to assist our working landowners and operators who face these issues.

It is hoped that this position paper will stimulate a discussion of conservation impacts and possible solutions emerging from this situation. It is further hoped that this type of information will find a place at the table when decisions are made about the future of the Northern Gray Wolf and our working landowners and operators.

WACD appreciates the leadership and input by members of the WACD Wolf Task Force in preparing this important position paper.