

## **To hunt or to protect? Western states struggle with wolf management**

By Stateline.org, adapted by Newsela staff on 08.03.16

HUNTERS, Wash. — Sheep rancher Dave Dashiell got to his feet and wiped the blood from his hands. A newborn lamb he had just delivered took one breath, then another. He laid the lamb down gently in front of its mother. "I hope he lives," Dashiell said.

In this part of Washington state, the hope is not only that the lamb will avoid sickness and injury, but that gray wolves won't make it their prey.

As gray wolves multiply and come off endangered species lists in Western states, a new problem has emerged: Packs of wolves are harassing ranchers, their sheep and cattle. And states are trying to walk the line between pleasing the ranchers, who view the animals as an economic and physical menace, and environmentalists, who see them as a success story.

### **An Endangered Species**

"How do you cross that divide? It is a tough one," said Donny Martorello, wolf policy chief in the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. "It really is about having a large carnivore back on the landscape that has been absent for decades. If you are in a rural community, there is that uncertainty that it will threaten your way of life and how you support your family."

However, America has decided it values wildlife, he said, and his job is to help the wolf population recover. In most of the United States, gray wolves are listed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as an endangered species and cannot be hunted or trapped. But in certain areas and some states – Montana, Idaho, the eastern third of Washington and Oregon, and north-central Utah – the wolves are not wholly protected. In the early 1900s, gray wolves were nearly extinct, except in Alaska. But, according to the federal agency, protection programs have restored their population to an estimated 1,904 in Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Oregon and Washington as of the end of last year.

### **A Certain Number Of Packs**

Justin Hedrick, 29, a fifth-generation rancher and co-owner of the Diamond M Ranch in Laurier, Washington, maintains there are enough wolf packs in the northeastern part of the state to justify lifting protections on them statewide. But that's not how it works.

Washington is divided roughly into thirds, and each part of the state must have a certain number of packs for the wolves to come off the protected list. The northeastern third more than qualifies, but the other two do not, according to the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Wolves affect cattle and sheep in other ways as well. Len McIrvin, 73, Hedrick's grandfather and co-owner of the Diamond M, has been in the ranching business his entire life. He said the cows have been more skittish and haven't given birth as often since the wolves have been around. McIrvin said that when wolves spook cattle, 20 percent of the cows don't have calves in the spring, compared with a normal 2 to 3 percent.

Dashiell, 59, said the same for his sheep. He said he lost 300 sheep in 2014 to a nearby wolf pack, out of a

flock of 1,800. State Fish and Wildlife officials confirmed two dozen kills and tried to kill four wolves in the area, but the wily wolves successfully hid in the trees, and only one wolf was killed.

### **A Costly Program**

The wolf program is costly for the state, too. Washington state has spent \$3.3 million and countless man hours on the wolves. Shawn Cantrell is a northwest regional director for the Defenders of Wildlife, a national environmental group. He said that, although he sympathizes with ranchers, wolves still need protection. He maintains that the loss of livestock is a "big deal, an economic as well as a personal loss" to ranchers. But wolves account for a relatively small percentage of livestock loss.

In 2013, the state created the Wolf Advisory Group, whose members included environmentalists and ranchers. Working with the group, the state has come up with ways to try to protect livestock, such as lights, sirens, fencing, range riders and dogs. The costs are shared with ranchers, but ranchers say these methods are nearly useless.

### **Livestock Owners Versus Environmentalists**

State Representative Joel Kretz, another Republican who represents the area, pooh-poohs the preventive measures, too. He said residents in the western part of the state, which includes Seattle, don't get it.

"I understand the concept of sitting in Seattle and thinking that it's good hearing wolves howl in the distance. But they don't understand what we go through," he said.

In Idaho, wolves have been hunted since 2009. Mike Keckler, spokesman for the Idaho Fish and Game Department, argued that the state has succeeded in reducing the conflict between livestock owners and environmentalists.

But every year during wolf-hunting season, wildlife protection groups become upset. For example, a "predator derby" in Idaho in 2015, which awarded prizes for killing animals including wolves, was criticized as a "gratuitous wildlife massacre" by the environmental group Project Coyote.