



## Washington State Gray Wolf Conservation and Management Plan

### Helpful Background Information

Gray Wolves have been classified as federally endangered since 1973 and as a state endangered species since 1980. In 2009 wolves in the eastern two thirds of Washington were delisted – or removed from protection of the federal Endangered Species Act. However, they remain a state-listed endangered species. Wolves once roamed the entire state of Washington but were extirpated from the state by the 1930s. Wolves are now beginning to naturally return to Washington, and two known breeding packs exist in the northern part of the state. Expansion of this small population is expected as a result of increased dispersal of wolves from recovering populations in Idaho, Montana, and British Columbia.

In 2007, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) initiated development of a state wolf conservation and management plan in anticipation of the expected natural recovery. The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife appointed an advisory Wolf Working Group comprised of 17 citizens to provide recommendations on the plan to WDFW. The draft plan establishes conservation/recovery objectives for downlisting and delisting wolves (moving the species from endangered to threatened and removing it entirely from protections, respectively). The plan also identifies strategies to address conflicts and achieve recovery.

The stated goals of the plan are to: 1) implement conservation strategies that will result in the reestablishment of naturally reproducing and viable wolf populations distributed in a significant portion of the specie’s former range in Washington, and 2) to manage wolf-livestock conflicts in a way that does not negatively impact the recovery or long term perpetuation of sustainable wolf populations.

### Talking Points

While the plan already incorporates many valuable objectives, a few things are important to change.

Target numbers for conservation and recovery of wolves are too LOW. Target numbers for the Washington plan are inconsistent with USFWS recommendations. Scientific experts conclude that viability would be “enhanced by higher (500 or more wolves) rather than lower population levels” and longer time frames to reach these goals. 15 breeding pairs is not based on any scientific studies. The plan should call instead for 30 breeding pairs.

Eliminate the “caught in the act” killing provision for livestock owners at the endangered and threatened phases of recovery. Given the history of poaching in this state and the high potential for misuse, this provision could seriously hamper recovery efforts. Investing in non-lethal deterrent methods and providing livestock owners with a fair compensation package are more effective approaches at the early stages of wolf recovery. Poaching of wolves has already occurred in the state of Washington with two wolves from a confirmed Washington pack killed within this last year.

### **Wolves and Ecosystems**

Wolves are an important part of our ecosystems. The famous naturalist Aldo Leopold was an early advocate of the theory that lack of wolves on the northern range of Yellowstone directly resulted in vegetative damage from over browsing by wolf prey: elk and deer. In recent studies done in Yellowstone, Drs. Ripple and Beschta have echoed Leopold’s sentiments stating, “the removal of keystone predators effectively eliminated any wolf driven trophic cascades that had historically influenced elk numbers and foraging patterns, which, in turn, maintained a healthy distribution and structure of deciduous woody plant communities” (Ripple and Beschta 2005). In other words, with no wolves, elk populations skyrocketed, and increased elk numbers had cascading effects on the local ecosystem. For instance, more elk meant more browsing and the inability of aspen trees to regenerate. The lack of aspen trees meant less cover for small ground mammals and thus less food for their predators. The lack of aspen trees also meant less shade and warmer stream temperatures which stressed local fish populations. Ripple and Beschta have continued their research and have documented dramatic changes in the vegetation, soils, and even fish and beaver populations since the return of wolves to the many landscapes.

Wolves should be an important part of the ecosystem in Washington as well, and Washington’s plan should reflect the growing need for wolves to help restore resilient ecosystems in the face of a changing climate.

### **Resources and Written Comments**

You can find the full plan at the following website:

[http://wdfw.wa.gov/wildlife/management/gray\\_wolf/mgmt\\_plan.html](http://wdfw.wa.gov/wildlife/management/gray_wolf/mgmt_plan.html)

Research articles on wolves and ecosystems:

<http://www.gptaskforce.org/ripple-article>

Although it is important for your voice to be heard at these public meetings, if you can’t make the Oct 28th meeting please submit written comments by 5 p.m. on January 8, 2010

By e-mail: <http://www.wdfw.wa.gov/hab/sepa/sepa.htm>

Fax: (360) 902-2946

Or mail:

Responsible Official: Teresa A. Eturaspe  
Re: Wolf Conservation and Management Plan DEIS  
SEPA/NEPA Coordinator  
600 Capital Way North  
Olympia, WA 98501-1091

**Task Force Contact**

Jessica Walz, Conservation Director

[jessica@gptaskforce.org](mailto:jessica@gptaskforce.org)

503-221-2102 x 101