

“GREEN SHEET”

Meeting: November 6-7, 2009

Agenda Item 10: Wolf Conservation and Management Plan Update – **Briefing**

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Background:

In response to the naturally occurring return of wolves to Washington, state management responsibility following federal delisting, and state law (WAC 232-12-297) requirements, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) began developing a conservation and management plan for the species in 2006. Seventeen citizens with a broad range of perspectives were appointed by the WDFW director to a Wolf Working Group to advise staff in developing the plan.

The working group and WDFW staff met eight times during 2007 through 2008 and public scoping meetings were held throughout the state in August 2007. A draft plan underwent peer review in 2008. A revised draft was discussed Sept. 1-2, 2009 by the Wolf Working Group. Comments from that discussion have been added into the plan and a draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the plan has been released for a 3-month public review from October 5, 2009 to January 8, 2010. This will include twelve public meetings throughout the state. An additional blind science-focused peer review of the draft plan is being conducted during the public review period. After the public and peer review comments have been addressed, WDFW will meet again with the wolf working group in one or more meetings in mid- 2010 to complete the plan. It is estimated that the final recommended plan will be presented to the Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission for consideration in late 2010.

The Draft EIS evaluates four alternatives, including a no action alternative. The first three alternatives set conservation/recovery objectives at 15 breeding pairs for delisting (6 for downlisting to Threatened, and 12 for downlisting to Sensitive status); under Alternative 4 there would be no recovery objectives established. Alternatives one, two, and three have different standards for protection and restoration for wolves, including geographic distribution of conservation targets and numbers of recovery areas. They also differ in management options to address conflicts including lethal control strategies, compensation for losses to livestock owners, and management of conflicts with ungulates. The DEIS considers the possible environmental effects of each alternative.

Alternative 1: This alternative has a more aggressive lethal control strategy than that of Alternatives 2 and 3. It would implement lethal control options at earlier listing statuses than the other alternatives. It sets a lower standard for geographic distribution of recovery objectives, such that state downlisting and delisting of the species could occur with the majority of animals present in one or two recovery regions. It allows earlier implementation of management tools for addressing livestock conflicts, and it also recommends a less generous compensation package for documented incidents of depredation.

Alternative 2 (Preferred Alternative; Draft Wolf Conservation and Management Plan): This alternative meets the goals and objectives for establishing a long-term viable wolf population while at the same time addressing wolf-livestock conflicts and interactions between wolves and ungulates. It sets a moderate geographic distribution of conservation/recovery objectives for downlisting and delisting, with an emphasis on adequate numbers being present in the Southern Cascades/Northwest Coast recovery region, but does not require establishment of wolves in a fourth Pacific Coast recovery region to achieve delisting. This alternative includes a range of proactive, non-lethal and lethal control options for addressing livestock conflicts, and recommends generous compensation for dealing with confirmed and probable depredations.

Alternative 3: This alternative has the highest standard for the geographic distribution of conservation/recovery objectives for downlisting and delisting wolves, including a requirement that they be present in a fourth recovery region, the Pacific Coast Recovery Region, before the species can be downlisted and delisted. This alternative is the most conservative on when management tools for addressing livestock conflicts can be implemented, and it also recommends the most generous compensation package for documented cases of confirmed and probable depredation.

Alternative 4 – No Action (Current Management): This alternative emphasizes protection and restoration of wolves using existing programs, but does not develop a conservation and management plan for Washington. As a result, wolves would continue to be listed as endangered until a state recovery plan was completed that established recovery objectives. Limited management options would be used to address conflicts, and compensation provided for livestock depredation would be through the Defenders of Wildlife program or the Washington State legislature.

Selection of the Preferred Alternative: Alternative 1 is feasible, and has the least emphasis on protection and restoration of wolves in the state. Wolf populations could continue to be at risk under this alternative because of more aggressive lethal control, and a more limited geographic distribution in the state. Alternative 4 emphasizes protection and restoration of wolves using existing programs, but does not develop a conservation and management plan. As a result, wolves would continue to be listed as endangered and the purpose and need of a plan would not be met. Alternative 2 is the Preferred Alternative because it has the best chance of success to achieve the purpose and need of the plan: to establish a long-term viable wolf population in Washington while at the same time addressing wolf-livestock conflicts and interactions between wolves and wild ungulates.

Translocation (moving animals from one recovery region in Washington to another for the purpose of establishing a new population) is a conservation tool in the draft plan that may be used to establish and expand wolf populations in recovery regions that wolves have failed to reach through natural dispersal. It is a key element of the plan and was broadly supported among members of the Wolf Working Group. The draft plan outlines a range of proactive and lethal management options for addressing wolf-livestock conflicts. Implementation of these is based on the status of wolves to ensure that conservation/recovery objectives are met. The draft plan includes a recommended program to compensate livestock producers for livestock losses due to wolves. Higher compensation would be paid for losses that occur on acreages more than or equal to 100 acres because of the difficulty of finding carcasses on large acreages.

Policy Issue(s) you are bringing to the Commission for consideration:

None, this is a requested update on the status of the planning process. Policy issues will be addressed once the extensive public process and review is complete and a recommendation is presented to the Commission.

Public involvement process used and what you learned:

The Wolf Conservation and Management Plan is undergoing an extensive public involvement process as an EIS through the State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA), including an advisory stakeholder group, public scoping, peer review, a 3-month public review, including 12 public meetings around the state. The entire process includes:

- 10-11 Wolf Working Group meetings (2007-2010)
- 7 SEPA scoping meetings held throughout the state (2007)
- 5 Commission Briefings (2007-2010)
- 2 Senate Natural Resources Committee Briefings (2007 and 2008)
- Broad peer review of the first working draft of the plan (2008)
- 3-month public review of the Draft EIS of the plan, including 12 public meetings held throughout the state (2009-2010)
- Blind scientific peer review of the public review draft of the plan (2009-10)
- A Commission meeting including public input to adopt a final wolf plan (Estimated as late 2010)

Action requested (identify the specific Commission decisions you are seeking):

None. This is a requested briefing.

Draft motion language:

N/A

Justification for Commission action:

N/A

Communications plan:

- News Releases
 - WDFW Website
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