

# **COMMISSION POSITION STATEMENT: Wolves in Washington**

**April 13, 2012**

## **Background and Context**

The purpose of this position statement is to provide some background context for Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission (Commission) guidelines and objectives relative to management of wolves in Washington. The purpose is to establish strategic direction for the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (Department) as it works to implement the recently adopted Wolf Conservation and Management Plan (Wolf Recovery Plan).

This position statement defines guidelines and objectives for executing the Department's responsibilities and guiding the development of a post-delisting management plan. It also identifies unresolved issues of concern to the Commission

Nothing in this position statement is intended to conflict with the Wolf Conservation and Management Plan for Washington, adopted on December 3, 2011.

## **The Future of Wolves in Washington**

Following re-introduction releases in Yellowstone National Park and Idaho within the Northern Rocky Mountain Distinct Population Segment (DPS) in the early 1990s, wolf populations expanded rapidly, demonstrating the species' resilience and adaptability. Wolf populations continue to grow throughout the West. Natural wolf re-colonization is now occurring in Washington.

Experts disagree on the question of how well wolves will fare in Washington. With the smallest land base, the second highest human population among the western states, large gaps between expanses of suitable habitat, and a smaller prey base, wolf populations may not expand as quickly in Washington as they have in the Rocky Mountain States. Conversely, wolves are resilient and adaptable animals with high fecundity and population growth potential and they may expand exceedingly well.

There are many unanswered questions about wolves in Washington and how we should best accommodate this new addition to the landscape. It is vital that we accurately monitor their progress, understand their impacts, and carefully track wolf populations in our State.

With this in mind, the Department must respond to the "reality" on the ground no matter what happens here. Regardless of the rate of recovery, wolf population monitoring and responding

rapidly to incidents of human conflict, unacceptable impacts on ungulates, and livestock depredations are high priorities for the Commission and the Department.

## **Long-term Management of Wolves in Washington**

### *Priority Assigned this Management Challenge*

This position statement establishes guidelines and principles for the implementation of the Department's responsibilities during the downlisting, delisting and post-delisting stages of wolf management. To succeed, both the Commission and the Department must engage in active, assertive, and responsive management of wolves.

Years of budget cuts have left the Department with fewer available resources, so the challenges of managing wolves arrive at a difficult time. But in light of the overriding importance of actively managing wolf recovery, sufficient support must be dedicated to wolf management activities, including: population monitoring; research; response to reports and conflicts; management of ungulates; outreach and education; and law enforcement.

The Director and the Commission will communicate frequently to ensure timely and accurate review of Department actions to manage wolf populations through the delisting process and beyond.

### *Plan Secures Recovery*

The Wolf Recovery Plan passed by the Commission in December 2011 satisfies delisting criteria incorporated in WAC 232-12-297. It establishes recovery objectives for down listing and delisting of the species and relies on the best available science.

Population persistence analyses conducted by the Department indicated that the recovery objectives in the Plan should assure Washington's wolf populations will become healthy, genetically diverse, and persistent.

### *Social Tolerance must be Secured*

While the biological foundation of the Plan is critical to its success, so also is social tolerance. Rural communities located in "wolf country" have higher levels of anxiety about wolf recovery than do those who live outside wolf habitat. They fear dramatic changes in their way of life, their livelihoods, and their sense of security. Without effective management of wolf impacts, social tolerance in rural areas will decline, respect for the law and the Department may suffer, and wolves may be killed illegally.

A major focus by the Department must be on building and maintaining positive and effective working relationships with rural communities, livestock producers, hunters, and other stakeholders. Positive relationships will not be possible unless the Department communicates regularly with local producers to inform them about nearby wolf populations. Through regular contact with stakeholders and a commitment to respond to their concerns, the Department can build credibility for the program and public respect for the law.

### *Support Recovery and Ongoing Management*

Recovery of wolf populations in our state, as in many states in the U.S. Midwest and Rocky Mountain regions, has triggered a contentious political debate. Few other delisting processes have generated such strongly divided attitudes. As with most complicated natural resource management issues, decisions cannot be made solely on the basis of over-simplified opinion polls. Still, the views and opinions of the people matter.

In a 2009 survey of Washington State residents, Colorado State University found broad public acceptance (74.5%) for natural wolf re-colonization. Many residents respect wolves for their cultural value, intelligence, hunting ability, devotion to other pack members, and ecological role. Public testimony indicated that tourism aimed at seeing or hearing wolves in the wild will be of interest to numerous citizens and may generate economic benefits. The public expects the Department to be responsive to their viewpoints and to promote positive wolf-related interactions and wolf-related benefits such as the opportunity to personally observe, photograph or study wolves in the wild.

The survey also found that 69.8% accepted limits on wolves if they cause declines in deer and elk; 65.7% accepted lethal removal of wolves if they are causing loss of livestock; and 63.5% accepted hunting of wolves once they have reached recovery levels. In Washington, support is broad for both wolf recovery and for active management of wolves and their impacts.

### *Wolves are Not Like Other Listed Species*

Wolves are not like other listed species in Washington. In most cases, listed species have declined due to habitat loss or excess exploitation. In contrast, by the 1930s, wolves were intentionally extirpated to reduce their impacts to livestock. Unlike many other listed species that may require habitat protections in addition to “take” restrictions, wolves are resilient and prolific generalists that can thrive in many suitable habitat types, assuming sufficient prey, and social tolerance. No other listed species presents the potential for direct and significant predation on livestock and ungulate populations that wolves do. Few other listed species cause concerns for public safety. Because of these differences, intentional translocation of wolves is more controversial and socially divisive than natural recolonization. Use of translocation into areas without wolves as a means to accelerate dispersal will only be used consistent with

provisions of state and federal laws and regulations. Included among those requirements are those pertaining to adequate notice and opportunities for comment by affected communities. The Department will convey to the relevant federal agencies our interest in notification prior to federal decisions to move wolves from one area of federal land within our state to other areas under federal ownership within our state.

### Impacts on Ungulates

As wolves increase in number, their impacts on prey populations will also grow in certain areas. Where prey species were overabundant as was the case in Yellowstone National Park, the presence of wolves has been beneficial to vegetation and other species. Where prey populations are less abundant, the impact of wolves on ecosystem health may not be so clear.

Of Washington's 10 elk herds, three are meeting population objectives, three are below their population objectives, and two do not have set objectives as yet. Only two herds currently exceed objectives. Hunting opportunity has long been closely regulated to achieve herd objectives.

The Commission recognizes the importance of the hunting tradition. The North American Model of Wildlife Conservation founded in the 1800s has provided a durable approach to securing adequate funding for wildlife management and conservation. Under this model, hunting license sales provide revenues for management and hunters supply a low cost and efficient means to manage wildlife populations. The Commission is concerned with potential future impacts of wolves on ungulate populations (deer, elk and moose), resulting impacts on hunting opportunity, and the continued viability of the North American Model in our state.

The Commission has directed the Department to actively engage in wolf management. This should include: monitoring of wolf re-colonization rates, population size, pack/breeding pair locations, rapid responses to wolf problems, research, monitoring wolf impacts on ungulate population abundance and demographics. Actions to maintain or improve ungulate populations to prevent a significant decline must also be a high priority.

### Impacts on Livestock Production

Wolves pose a significant concern to livestock producers. Recent experience shows that while the overall impact may not be significant on the industry as whole, individual producers can experience very large losses and management difficulties. Economic losses are not restricted to direct mortality, they also include more difficult to quantify effects of stress including lower than expected weight gain and lower calf production. Some livestock owners fear that the

Department cannot be relied upon to respond promptly with effective tools, no matter what assurances are included in the Wolf Recovery Plan.

To establish credibility and build social tolerance, the Department must assertively use all management tools available. When the Department lacks capacity to effectively respond directly, it must enable livestock producers to rapidly utilize appropriate tools as outlined in the Plan, consistent with state and federal laws.

Practical, effective options for livestock owners must be promptly offered. Consistent with federal and state law, the options must offer reasonable and effective ways for livestock producers to protect their property. When a Department-issued permit is required, processing and issuance of the permit must be timely, efficient and offer enough flexibility to address a variety of situations.

#### *Begin Development of a Post Delisting Management Plan*

The Wolf Recovery Plan establishes the management direction for recovering wolf populations in Washington State. Once recovery objectives are achieved, certain state protections will no longer be necessary.

With the recovery plan in place, it is now a priority for the department to begin development of a long term management plan to assure that recovered wolf populations do not cause undue harm to livestock interests, prey populations, and public safety while at the same time ensuring wolf population levels remain above recovery objectives.

The Commission directs the Department to take initial steps towards development of a statewide population management plan for wolves. At a minimum, the long term management plan must secure the health and persistence of wolves on the landscape above a level that would warrant its classification as threatened or endangered. The management plan must also adopt an approach that integrates wolves into a framework of holistic wildlife conservation that secures the health and stability of prey populations. The Commission will take an active role in the initial scoping process and throughout the development of the post-delisting management plan for wolves.

#### *Secure Management Authority for the State*

Recent efforts to delist wolves in the Rocky Mountain States provide examples we hope to avoid, e.g., continuous litigation; management policy reversals; and disruptions in the assignment of authorities. Wildlife management has long been the prerogative of the states with important exceptions. Recovery of federally listed endangered species is one of those exceptions in which the role of the federal government role is well recognized.

It is vital that the Department act in a manner that secures and maintains authority for Washington State to manage wolves. Many management tools outlined in the Plan will not be available to the Department for the western two-thirds of the state if the federal Endangered Species Act designation of “Endangered” status remains in place. The Commission believes our recent adoption and the Department’s implementation of Washington’s Wolf Recovery Plan will demonstrate to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service that wolf recovery and management can and will be appropriately managed by the Department.

Guidelines:

The Director will be responsible for wolf recovery and management decisions based on the following guiding principles:

- *Act in a manner that secures and maintains authority for the State of Washington to manage wolves;*
- *Maintain a viable and connected wolf population in a manner that minimizes the risk that the species will require protections through relisting under state or federal law;*
- *Prioritize agency budgets and staff resources to support wolf management and human conflict reduction;*
- *Take measures to assure that observations, reports of dangerous encounters, depredations, or other conflicts are reported, responded to and documented in an effective reporting system;*
- *Establish protocols for addressing “chronic problem wolves” and act assertively to reduce human-wolf conflicts in order to promote tolerance and respect for the law;*
- *Maintain timely, positive and effective working relationships with rural communities, livestock producers, hunters, conservation organizations, and other stakeholders;*
- *Actively engage in research and management aimed at reducing wolf impacts on livestock, including providing prompt, practical and effective options for impacted livestock owners;*
- *Actively engage in research and management aimed at reducing wolf impacts on big game populations;*

- *Place a very high priority on maintenance of sustainable hunter opportunity including: meaningful efforts to increase broad public understanding of the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation;*
- *Pursue public acceptance of sustainable ungulate and wolf harvest as a necessary part of managing wildlife and the ecosystems they depend upon; and.*
- *Embrace an adaptive approach to wolf recovery, management, and associated public communications.*

### Ongoing Concerns

The Commission recognizes that wolf recovery poses unique challenges to the Department during a time when resources are diminishing. The Commission will continue to closely oversee the implementation of the Wolf Recovery Plan as progress is made towards delisting. If facts on the ground indicate that the Wolf Recovery Plan is not achieving its key objectives, the Commission will revisit its approach.

As more information becomes available, the Commission will review the following issues of concern:

- Effectiveness of wolf population monitoring;
- Effectiveness in addressing and management of wolf related impacts to ungulate populations;
- Effectiveness in managing ungulate populations for public recreation opportunities;
- Effectiveness of responses to human and livestock conflicts;
- Regional abundance and distribution of wolves; and
- Establishment of post-delisting management objectives.