

Wolf Advisory Group

MEETING SUMMARY¹, NOVEMBER 2-3, 2022

WAG members present: Tyler Allen, Alex Baier, Bill Kemp, Caitlin Scarano, Dan Paul, Diane Gallegos, Jess Kayser, Jessica Kelley, Lisa Stone, Lynn Okita, Nick Martinez, Paula Swedeen, Samee Charriere, Rick Perleberg, Sierra Smith, and Marie Neumiller.

Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife (WDFW, Department) staff members present: Annemarie Prince, Ben Maletzke, Jim Brown, Julia Smith, Staci Lehman, Kevin Robinette, Kyla West, Mike Sprecher, Steve Pozzanghera, Joey McCanna (Day 1), Donny Martorello (Day 2), and Trent Roussin.

Facilitation team: Susan Hayman and Tristan Marquez

Meeting Action Items

Responsible Party	Action Item	Target Date
WDFW	Distribute Wolf Management Plan, People & Wolves in Washington, and Topics Table to new WAG members	Completed
WDFW	Share information on what the commission is working on	Ongoing

November 2, 2022

Opening

Susan Hayman, Ross Strategic facilitator, opened the Wolf Advisory Group (WAG) meeting by welcoming members, WDFW staff, and meeting observers, and providing an overview of the meeting objectives and agenda.

The purpose of the meeting was to 1) Review foundational WAG processes and references, including: how WAG advises WDFW, Conservation Conflict Transformation, Wolf-Livestock Interaction Protocol, and Gray Wolf Conservation and Management Plan. 2) Receive an update from WDFW on WAG member recruitment, wolf-livestock activity¹, and other activities since the June 2022 WAG meeting. 3) Consider and act on a proposal for WAG advice to WDFW regarding funding, creating, and operating carcass compost, or other similar facilities. 4) Revisit information presented and discussed at the previous two WAG meetings regarding wolf-ungulate interactions and provide members and WDFW staff an opportunity to make connections and explore outstanding questions.

Introductions

WAG Member and WDFW Staff Introductions

¹ This summary is a synthesis of the meeting discussion November 2-3, 2022. The meeting summary will be publicly available following finalization of the meeting documentation package.

Hayman invited WAG members and WDFW staff in attendance to provide a more extended introduction of themselves. The four newly appointed WAG members; Sierra Smith, Alex Baier, Marie Neumiller, and Tyler Allen also introduced themselves and expressed enthusiasm for joining the group. Following introductions, the WAG and WDFW staff participated in the customary round-robin check-in.

Ground Rules Review

Following a thorough review of the Groundrules, a WAG member noted that the ground rules were developed by the WAG members based on how they would like to be treated. The WAG may choose at any time to update the Groundrules. Hayman noted the Groundrules were most recently updated in January 2022.

Primer on Wolf-Livestock Interaction Protocol

Julia Smith, Wolf Policy Lead for WDFW, briefly reviewed the Wolf-Livestock Interaction Protocol. She reminded attendees that the [2011 Wolf Conservation and Management Plan](#) is the overarching guide for wolf management in the state. However, it does not detail how to address certain situations and make certain decisions. The plan focuses on non-lethal tools and does not provide detailed guidance on lethal removal. The [2017 Wolf-Livestock Interaction Protocol](#) was developed to provide additional guidance not in the management plan.

Smith explained the WAG has a strong preference for minimizing both loss of livestock and wolves. While Smith emphasized the state will never achieve zero loss of livestock and wolves, the use of non-lethal tools can reduce the losses. Section 3 of the protocol discusses on-the-ground collaboration between WDFW wildlife conflict specialists, producers, and landowners to reduce wildlife conflict. Smith noted that WDFW wildlife conflict specialists have local knowledge that administrative WDFW staff do not have. Most non-lethal deterrents described in the protocol are not new; however, the WAG recommended the addition of a new section to the protocol in September 2020 recognizing the importance of range riding as a tool, and that it may be the only effective deterrent in some situations. At that time, the WAG believed more guidance was needed for range riding and emphasized the need for near daily presence of range riders on the landscape, and the need for thorough documentation. The protocol recognizes the importance of autonomy for producers and provides flexibility in the non-lethal tools they choose to use. The protocol also provides guidance for depredation investigations and the criteria that needs to be met for lethal removal on targeted wolves to be implemented.

Smith described the process used by WDFW when determining whether to undertake lethal removal. Section 8 of the protocol details WDFW's commitment to notifying the public when there is a depredation and any of relevant details. While the department strives to be accurate and transparent with its updates and monthly wolf report, the safety of both department staff and producers is a primary consideration in the level of detailed information publicly shared. At the end of the livestock grazing season, the department provides an overview of all wolf-livestock activity in its annual report.

WDFW wolf biologist, Trent Roussin, noted that the protocol took over a year to develop and required a lot of work by both WAG members and WDFW staff (this was affirmed by WAG members at the meeting who were involved in the protocol development). Roussin reminded the group that the protocol is guidance—the criteria are not always black and white. That is, reaching a threshold result in

consideration of lethal action, but does not always result in lethal action. WDFW believes the protocol is the best attempt at providing guidance for wolf-livestock conflict management.

Roussin explained that the department considers lethal removal when it documents at least 3 depredation events within a 30-day rolling window of time or at least 4 depredation events within a 10-month rolling window of time. The 10-month time frame was chosen because depredation patterns may be interrupted during the winter when cattle are off the landscape. Lethal removal is considered if a depredation pattern continues when cattle are back on the landscape. Joey McCanna, WDFW Wildlife Conflict Supervisor for Region 1, said the threshold was based off historical data on depredations in Washington. WDFW looked at beginning of year and end of grazing season numbers to determine a suitable number.

Roussin added that the 10-month window was particularly important to producers on the WAG because of the pasture rotation. A WAG member noted that pasture rotation is not the same every year and 10 months seems to provide adequate flexibility to account for that.

A WAG member noted initially struggling with the threshold numbers but acknowledged that the consensus model needed to be followed. The stakeholder group was diverse when the WAG set out for this process, and members were trying to learn from each other and WDFW.

Smith said it is difficult to capture the complexity of every conversation and decision that is made, but the department makes every attempt to thoroughly discuss and consider all the factors when making a decision of whether to use lethal removal.

WAG members referenced the original wolf working group and the number of years this group invested in the Gray Wolf Conservation and Management plan. The plan concluded that a multi-stakeholder group (ultimately the WAG) needed to be involved for the plan to be successful. Achieving the four goals of the plan is intended to address the best interests of wolves and the stakeholders of the WAG. Having a trusted process and putting the resources towards neutral facilitation is also very important. The [2015 Wolves in Washington](#) report was cited as a precursor to the protocol.

Non-lethal Deterrents: Jim Brown, WDFW Wildlife Conflict Section Manager, reported there are several funding sources for non-lethal deterrents, and producers often implement their own deterrents using their own means. The legislature provides funding to WDFW for non-lethal control, and other funding is passed from the Department of Agriculture to stakeholder organizations/non-government organizations (NGOs). The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is also an occasional provider of funding through grants.

As a key non-lethal deterrent, WDFW has two general “buckets” for funding range riders: One is for range riders the department contracts to work with regional wildlife conflict specialists; the other funding comes through damage prevention agreements. With funding from this second bucket, WDFW assists producers to hire and manage their own range riders and implement other non-lethal controls. Brown reported that northeast Washington currently does not have a lot of range riders, and the department is looking for more. Producers ultimately need to be comfortable with the range riders they are working with.

The department currently has two full time range riders in the blue mountains, and they move riders based on expected need. WDFW staff manages range riders in coordination with producers and their

needs. Washington has NGOs with range riders that the department works closely with and coordinates their range rider movements.

In response to a question regarding how non-lethal tools are deployed and maintained, McCanna explained that WDFW sets up fladry and ask landowners to maintain it, though the department often maintains the fladry itself. One WAG member stated the belief that most producers do not have time to move and maintain fox lights and other non-lethal deterrents, and that some feel like the management of additional non-lethals has been pushed on them.

McCanna noted that wildlife conflict specialists attend local cattlemen’s meetings and talk to producers to identify those willing to work with the department on non-lethal control. Brown added that WDFW does not provide range riders on grazing allotments where producers do not want them, and the purpose is more for the riders to monitor the cattle than wolves. Producers can be sensitive about interactions with cattle, and if there is a problem with a specific range rider, wildlife conflict specialists try to get to a common understanding.

There was disagreement by some WAG members that range riding is primarily about monitoring cattle, observing that range riding is in response to wolf management. Some WAG members believe allowing range riders access to wolf collar data would help riders to know where they are needed. Another member said cattle movement is the responsibility of the producer, who can use their own range rider to conduct other livestock management activities. Others said that organizations like the Northeast Washington Wolf-Cattle Collaborative have range riders that sometimes rely on cattle behavior to spot wolf threats. The range riders do not move the cattle around but can use cattle activity for information. Most acknowledged that the best ranging riding happens when trust is built with producers.

McCanna added that the department uses education and outreach for producers in high conflict areas that do not want range riding. If they are unwilling to allow range riders, the department provides them as much information as they can on how to address the conflicts. McCanna offered himself as a contact for any producers that are interested in range riders.

WDFW Updates

2022 Grazing Season

Jim Brown reviewed the 2022 grazing season’s depredation and lethal removals. The full update along with wolf pack population numbers can be found on the [WDFW website](#). Brown clarified that the three instances of producers killing wolves caught in the act of livestock depredations over the 2022 season were determined to be legal per WDFW investigations. Roussin added that the Stranger pack wolf that was caught in the act was clearly chasing cattle when it was shot, and that carcass attractants were not the main issue. Brown said WDFW staff have been working hard with producers to reduce carcass attractants. There had been some longstanding carcass attraction issues in the location of Stranger pack wolf, and future carcass sanitation issues will be the responsibility of the producer. Smith said that WDFW enforcement officers must follow the letter of the law in such cases, and the law in this case does not specifically address situations where carcass attractants may be a factor. Captain Mike Sprecher, WDFW enforcement officer, added that officers are trying to resolve issues with landowners with carcass issues but there are conflicting laws—that is, sometimes it is lawful for a producer to allow natural decomposition of carcasses—but the laws need to be better aligned.

Brown explained that in response to the Stranger pack situation, WDFW decided to take action and create a carcass disposal pit at its own expense. WDFW staff worked with the Departments of Ecology and Agriculture for the pit standards used to dispose of carcasses. The holes were dug, covered, and fenced to prevent future disturbance. While it addressed the current problem, it is not necessarily a strategy for the future. McCanna added that the department also has contracts with county landfills for producers to dispose of carcasses that the department will pay for, or have staff take the carcasses there themselves. WDFW could probably do that in other areas with adequate funding.

Brown noted the department investigated more unknown than probable or confirmed depredations this summer. Producers not reporting depredation is a potential issue, but the department does not know how widespread it is. A WAG member said some producers in northeast Washington believe it to be a severe issue. Many producers, especially big allotments, do not report. There are many cattle that do not come home and are never found. Roussin noted there is little the department can do if producers do not want to report depredations, yet depredations can spread if they go unreported and are not investigated. He acknowledged that reporting can be arduous, but the problem could balloon and affect other producers. WDFW has discussed estimating undocumented depredations--current compensation given to producers builds in costs for indirect and unrecognized losses. McCanna added that the department does not use Farm Service Agency (FSA) data but encourages producers to follow that avenue for compensation. Brown noted that FSA is a livestock indemnity program, and the data they have is only as good as the people who participate in reporting.

A WAG member noted some conservationists participate on the WAG because many cattle graze on large tracts of public land. They want to collaborate to promote active management of cattle through the year. Smith added that this is part of the trust issue. A lot of foundational groundwork for the WAG formation was invested in working with actual wildlife conflict specialists. It is hard to understand what an individual's issues are, but WDFW does try and build a lot of one-on-one relationships.

A WAG member said producers are concerned when their losses exceed the established average of 2-3% loss. It is challenging to manage livestock on expansive, forested, mountain ranges.

Compensation is a topic that is ripe for discussion. If there was a compensation system that was really satisfying to producers that would be very helpful. WDFW believes the current system isn't being taken advantage of as much as it should.

Rulemaking Update

Smith reminded the group that Governor Jay Inslee committed in 2020 to act on the petition for draft rule language to strengthen the requirements for wolf-livestock conflict deterrence by September 2022. Smith said the issues are complex, and there was a need to substantively involve the public in the rulemaking process. WDFW ultimately prepared environmental and economic impact statements, and the issue went to the commission for a vote on July 8, 2022. The commission chose the no action alternative, which means the existing wolf-livestock interactions protocol will continue to be followed. A subsequent lawsuit was filed and then voluntarily dismissed. Smith encouraged WAG members to participate in any future rulemaking process.

Proposed WAG Advice: Carcass Compost Facilities

Introduction

This topic was switched in the agenda to take place immediately after lunch, rather than preceding the introduction to how the WAG develops advice. The agenda change was made to accommodate the availability of WAG producers for this discussion.

Paula Swedeen, WAG member representing Conservation Northwest (CNW), cited the Stranger pack caught in the act incident as a catalyst for a larger discussion around the need for producers to have easier disposal and compost options for livestock carcasses. Without good infrastructure, issues arise when predators are attracted by carcasses to active livestock operations. CNW wanted to bring this topic to the WAG to see if there is traction on approaching the legislature for funding for carcass disposal facilities in areas with high numbers of predators. She noted WDFW has arrangements with some local landfills, and staff have a lot of experience encountering this issue. She asked the WAG to consider if such services would be useful, how many would be needed, who would manage them, and where would they be located. Swedeen offered to take responsibility for leading the legislative budget proviso effort, and working with the Departments of Agriculture, WDFW, and Transportation. She asked for specific input from producers on potential outcomes that could become advice to the department. WDFW would need to have a robust enough conflict budget to support the expense. She introduced her colleague, Jay Shepherd, who previously worked with department in northeast Washington from 2009 - 2016 to contribute to the discussion.

Discussion

Brown cited the Blackfoot challenge as an example program for carcass composting. The Blackfoot challenge contracts individuals that periodically check in with producers and pick up carcasses, and it reportedly works very well. Smith added that WDFW is really excited with this conversation as it had cropped up as an issue all over the state. Carcass management needs exist beyond wolves, and the department would want this to be a program that works for all livestock producers.

The group discussed the no longer functioning composting area in Sherman Creek, which was closed because it couldn't be large enough be practical and still fit within Department of Health codes. WDFW staff identified central Washington as particularly in need of such a facility. The group discussed whether Health regulations would need to be amended to make future composting sites viable, but Shepherd clarified that the Department of Ecology regulated a producer's ability to dispose of decayed animals. Disposal facilities would need to be sensitive to these regulations, and access would need to be regulated.

A WAG member advised that the sites be kept separate for livestock and wildlife carcasses, and that all the state departments that would have regulations over the proposal should be contacted for cooperation. The most important objective is that it is useful for producers. Another WAG member suggested that broadening the scope of disposal would be beneficial to other areas of society such as butcher shops and transportation management of roadkill. The disposal site could be commercialized and could be lobbied via policy if enough divisions were incorporated. Another member agreed that disposal sites would have industry wide applications. Veterinary clinics need appropriate disposal sites as well and rendering plants are expensive to work with.

Smith acknowledged that health concerns, such as Chronic Wasting Disease, need to be considered if composting sites were to be broadly available, and that several departments would need to cooperate

for an effective proposal. However, another member reminded the group the Okanagan landfill would be full by 2032 and composting sites could offer an alternative. Shephard mentioned that Montana seems to have several composting locations throughout the state, and that Montana Transportation was supportive of them. The endangered status of grizzly bears appeared to be helping Montana with funding for these facilities.

The group acknowledged a good next step would be convening the Departments of Agriculture, Transportation, WDFW, Health and Ecology to discuss and address some of the regulatory questions. Composting seemed to be more sustainable than landfills, but a use needs to be found for the final product. The Washington legislature has been supportive of funding actions that help reduce potential for wolf-livestock conflict. If it could also solve other issues, some WAG members felt a well-thought-out proposal could get funded. Several WAG members stressed that producer organizations or community liaisons should also be involved in the discussions.

A WAG member expressed concern that new carcass disposal options were not needed nor the right path for reducing lethal conflict altogether, and that most producers either bury carcasses themselves or take them to a landfill. Another member stated that producers are struggling to have access to landfills in their area, and they cannot dig their own pits because of the rocky terrain and being close to the water table. Having somebody come pick up carcasses or even having a drop off point, especially for large animals would be very useful. For producers, time is a very limiting factor. It would also be important to get information about this service widely distributed and easy to understand. A WAG member noted that carcasses up on the mountains and other allotments are usually inaccessible, so making the proposal a wider scope than just livestock would be a good option. However, services should prioritize areas with high wolf activity. It was generally agreed that while carcass disposal options wouldn't be used by all producers, they could be helpful for those without other options.

Roussin stressed, that while some producers have solutions, carcass disposal is an issue statewide. The goal of composting would be near homeplaces where carcasses are near other cows. There have been instances where wolves were attracted to carcass piles near other cows. Removing that attractant would seem to help reduce the potential for depredation.

Steve Pozzanghera, Region 1 director, noted that some area's landfills seem to be working and there are no problems. He agreed that working on this issue as a state agency family was the best way to proceed. However, he encouraged focusing on carcass management rather than just composting. There might be different solutions in different places. Focusing on livestock would also allow WDFW to address the natural livestock decomposition issue. WAG members also noted that livestock carcass disposal services would help prevent the illegal dumping of carcasses on private property.

A member suggested that it may be better to start with a pilot disposal site and then scale up from there. However, it would need to be used by community members to be successful. This would also give producers autonomy in how they manage carcasses from depredation that they do not wish to report to WDFW. However, producers may be reluctant to use a facility created exclusively for them by the state. Roussin mentioned that wildlife conflict specialists around the state had identified a few areas where a pilot could be an option. The contractors who pick up carcasses would need to respect anonymity, and a pickup service would help save producers valuable time.

Hayman noted that the WAG would have time discuss additional ideas and potential recommendations at the November 3rd WAG meeting. She asked for volunteers to work on draft language to bring to the group for potential action on Thursday.

WAG Advice to WDFW

Introduction

Following the discussion of potential advice regarding carcass composting facilities, Hayman provided an overview of how the WAG provides advice to WDFW and invited members to make comments. She provided examples from other advisory groups who both develop consensus-based advice and recommendations, and who utilize “sounding boards” to document individual member perspectives in instances where consensus is not needed or likely. While not encouraging its use to avoid the hard work of consensus-building, such sounding boards can substantively inform agency decision-making in the absence of consensus.

Several WAG members expressed their support for the consensus model for this recommendation and stressed that any advice sent to WDFW needed to be very clear and documented properly for future reference. Smith acknowledged that a letter capturing the collective voice of WAG would be extremely powerful. Agency employees would benefit from letters that come from a diverse group of people and letters would keep stronger records. Previously, content recommendations for the protocol were the most formal advice the WAG provided to the department, which it then adopted. However, these had deadlines which the WAG was able to keep. A WAG member suggested that including space for dissent on formal letters from the WAG would help set the expectation of showing both sides. Smith agreed that this would give voice to all on the WAG, and that it could be framed as potential issues rather than as dissent.

There was discussion about the “sufficient consensus” model of decision-making the WAG has adopted, and that it, by necessity, requires members identify with one of the WAG “identity groups” (conservationists, hunters, producers) to determine whether there is sufficient support for a decision to move forward in the absence of 100% consensus. Though members acknowledged (as did WDFW) that members are “more than their identities,” there was concern about member identities being “fluid” depending on the issue at hand. The conclusion this day was that the central identity held (and declared) by members remain constant to avoid any perceived misuse during consensus sufficiency determinations. Hayman noted that the facilitation team would reach out to WAG members between meetings and get their perspectives on this for a potential future discussion.

WDFW priorities for WAG advice in 2023

Following an introduction by Smith regarding WDFW’s areas of interest for potential WAG recommendations and advice, WAG members suggested the following priorities for potential topics and advice to WDFW for 2023:

- Potential changes to the Wolf Management Plan for post-delisting status
- How to provide carcass management resources to producers
- Compensation model adjustments to encourage more use from producers
- Funding, oversight, and management of range riding

- How to adapt, be flexible, and avoid the expectations of perfection
- Reviewing depredation reporting pathways to reduce un-reported depredations
- Addressing Wolf-ungulate management
- Examining how wolves are monitored and how the data is shared
- Exploring the options WAG has to advise the commission

The WAG and WDFW staff discussed a proposal for the 2023 WAG meeting calendar, including both dates and locations. The facilitation team noted the comments and agreed to bring a refined version of the calendar to the group for action on the following day.

Following the discussion of future meeting planning, two persons provided public comment this day, as documented in Appendix A.

Closing

Hayman invited WAG members and WDFW staff to provide final reflections. Hayman thanked members and WDFW staff for their participation and closed the day's session, reminding the public of the opportunity to join an informal discussion session with WDFW staff following the closure of Wednesday's WAG meeting.

November 3, 2022

Opening

Hayman opened the second day of the meeting by reviewing the meeting agenda and objectives. She then invited WAG members and WDFW staff to check in with each other via round robin.

WAG members and WDFW staff agreed on a proposed schedule of WAG meeting for 2023 which is posted to the [WDFW website](#).

Proposed WAG Advice: Carcass Compost Facilities

WAG Action

WAG members and WDFW staff reviewed draft recommendation language developed the previous day by two WAG members, using notes from the group discussion and assisted by Hayman. Following additional refinement, all present WAG members (sixteen of the current seventeen were in attendance) reached consensus on the language for the recommendation. Hayman was assigned to develop a letter to transmit the recommendation to WDFW Director Susewind on behalf of the WAG. A roster of WAG members will be attached to this and all future consensus advice/recommendations, and other WAG communications moving forward.

Conservation Conflict Transformation: A Primer

WDFW Chief Scientist for the Wildlife Program, Donny Martorello, presented an overview of Conservation Conflict Transformation (CCT) to WAG members and WDFW staff. The presentation slides and recording can be found on the [WDFW Website](#).

Martorello emphasized how important it is that the WAG group is connected to their communities. All members have a role to play in connecting to their communities and bringing their voice forward. Sometimes community members that are not a part of the WAG need to be shown that the WAG is not a special group. Having the process open to the public is very important. The WAG is a collection of proxies for a very diverse Washington. It is important to sit down as a group and think of how to address things. If there is a disconnect of what the WAG is doing and the rest of the state, members should think about strategies to bring members closer together and strengthen connectiveness.

Smith agreed that the power of collaboration is as real as ever, but the WAG needs to showcase what it is actually accomplishing. Martorello added that the system is very dynamic. Different decision processes require different paths. Some decisions are less complex and don't require the investment in relationship building required by CCT. It is the relationship building that enables the WAG to work through the pressures of conflict, and generate outcomes that are lasting, durable, and helpful. The ability to come back as a team and work on the next issue is the most powerful thing. Several WAG members agreed with the sentiment. The process of learning CCT changed their outlooks at how they deal with relationships across the board on both personal and professional levels. For some, the people on WAG they were once most at odds with are people they now cherish.

A WAG member added that WDFW would benefit from using a CCT approach in other instances like, perhaps, addressing trust issues with some segments of the public.

Several WAG members expressed appreciation for the framework and how it incorporates successful elements in other models for identity-based conflict. Solutions are possible, but it requires significant buy-in and commitment from everyone. Information-sharing doesn't work all the time and emotional appeals need to be used at times to get everybody on board.

Members were pleased at achieving an outcome of a consensus recommendation today, and also were reminded that the WAG has directly and indirectly contributed to a growing wolf population, absence of litigation, and increasing level of non-lethal tools on the ground.

There was discussion about the potential positive outcomes if the commission were to apply CCT principles to its work. WAG members discussed the value of having WAG more connected to commission activities, including the potential to advise the commission. Smith said she would ensure the commission is informed of WAG meetings so that they can be engaged. However, it will be an adjustment for both WAG members and commissioners alike when considering what a future relationship might look like.

Martorello thanked the members for their commitment to the WAG and their communities. He reassured the group that the WAG is not an experiment, but the right process.

Wolf-Ungulate Interactions

Due to concerns with a potentially impending winter storm, the group agreed to end the meeting at 1pm, and move the significant discussion portion of this agenda item to the January meeting.

Introduction and context: Gray Wolf Conservation and Management Plan

WDFW wildlife biologist, Annemarie Prince, reviewed the ungulate section of the management plan. The plan defines at-risk ungulate populations as: 1) if the population is either state or federally listed; and 2) if a population drops below its population objective for two consecutive years. WDFW uses harvest data to look at the 10-year average and see if any populations have dropped below the target average.

The department revisits wolf management if it finds that wolves are causing the decline in population. In this instance, the state would prioritize moving wolves if they were still in the recovery phase. Otherwise, the department could discuss other actions, including lethal removal.

WDFW compiled the information it had to assess the status of ungulate populations. The state's ungulate management plans set population objectives by herd. The ungulate assessment was conducted by a combination of staff at headquarters and district biologists. Harvest data is the only metric the department has for determining some populations. Others use hunter efforts and days per kill, preseason efforts, and flight visual data. WDFW has sight ability models to understand abundance assessments. Population assessments are varied across the state. Harvest estimates go back many years, but they are only reliable since harvest reporting became mandatory in the early 2000s. Methods and the way the department counts animals has also changed, and the state uses sophisticated statistics to create a model. The department usually has about 60% of hunters reporting their harvest and then conducts a follow up survey and calls hunters that did not report. They stratify data for different hunting groups, and department statisticians comes up with true estimates of harvest. However, this data can contain errors. WDFW does not use external data for most ungulate populations. The department would like to harness trail camera footage but has not been able to figure out how to use this information.

A member noted that the WAG's Wolf-Ungulate Task Group's intent is to help tee up discussion that the WAG, and the hunting community, have been wanting to have. These discussions are intended to provide foundational info on ungulate populations and predator-prey interactions so that WAG members develop a common knowledge base. Looking at predator-prey dynamics will be a hard conversation, but starting it from a common understanding is better than individuals coming in with preconceived notions. WAG members noted that a lot of information on ungulate management and wolf-ungulate interactions was presented at previous WAG meetings and that it would be a good idea to pull out key findings that could easily be referenced.

WA Predator Prey Study Update

Martorello provided the group with a brief update on the Predator Prey Project. The field component of the predator-prey project ended about a year ago. It was a cooperative project with the University of Washington and is in the phase of getting the work across the finish line. The work will be released in batches—two papers have already been published. He detailed the progress towards completion of the work:

- Students defend their dissertations, which are considered publications and will be published in peer-reviewed journals. This process will continue through the spring of 2023
- Two students are wrapping up in November. Part of their defense is open to the public
- On December 8-10 there is a commission meeting in Clarkston where the students will be joining via zoom to share information

- The three students are presenting their findings-to-date next Monday (November 7) in Spokane at the wildlife conference

The “done phase” is when the paper reaches the peer-reviewed publication process. The reviewers can ask for more analysis and process. The important piece is that the information can be used to inform the public and decision makers. There has been some media around some early results, but it is just the first piece of information from a complex system. There will be time to step back and consider the big picture when it is all complete, but people should not jump to conclusions right away.

A WAG member noted that the peer review process can take a long time, and the current population numbers are concerning. Kevin Robinette affirmed that WDFW is reducing antlerless hunting as an action to preserve deer populations, and Martorello assured the group that publications would not take long enough for any significant changes to occur in ungulate populations.

A WAG member noted that there had been a noticeable drop of deer population in the Blue Mountains in the past three years and that disease was significantly reducing populations. Prince confirmed that there had been a blue tongue outbreak in summer 2021 and that the department was adjusting to account for such events. Some of the adjustments are based on inference, as the subsequent year’s hunting season needs to be set up before data of the present year is in.

Following the discussion of the predator prey study, one person provided public comment this day, as documented in Appendix A.

Closing

Hayman invited WAG members and WDFW staff to provide final reflections. Hayman thanked members and WDFW staff for their participation and closed the meeting.

Appendix A: Public Comment

Public comment received at the end of each meeting day is paraphrased below:

November 2, 2022

- Travis Fletcher:
 - I was glad to hear Julia talk about post delisting and taking a look at the 2011 plan. Over the past few years the department used to make predictions around the idea as to when it would meet the objectives. There continues to be doubt that the recovery objectives in the 2011 plan are attainable. There are a lot of wolves in Washington and they are not spreading out as anticipated. Also appreciate the work WDFW is doing to reduce conflict, and no depredations is an unrealistic goal. Appreciate seeing new folks on the WAG but there is still a missing voice of a Northeast Washington producer on the WAG. That is where the conflict is and it is missing from the WAG.
- Jay Shepherd:
 - Along the lines of what Julia said about trying to be perfect. We have to work against making perfect the enemy of the good. What we do in Washington is not only the best in the West but is the best in the world because nobody is doing what we do in Washington. I see a lot of bad news about wolves in the papers and there are a lot of people doing good on the landscape. Year after year it is amazing what people including ranchers and riders are doing. We need to get that message out.

November 3, 2022

- David Linn:
 - David Linn - Some of the nebulous comments about the predator-prey project concern me. If there is a discussion about killing wolves because of people's perceptions that there are not enough ungulates, that is a misguided discussion. I believe the decision to kill cougars was a bad decision. What this appeared to be was, "let's kill more cougars so we can kill more elk." The idea to kill more wolves to have more deer to kill felt misguided, there are other solutions.