

WASHINGTON DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE

Protocol for consideration and implementation of lethal removal of gray wolves during recovery to stop wolf depredations on livestock

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Section 1. Purpose and background

The primary purpose of this document is to describe when the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (herein Department or WDFW) considers lethal removal of gray wolves during recovery to stop repeated wolf depredations on livestock and the implementation of lethal removals. Wolf depredations on livestock and the lethal removal of wolves are serious matters, and affect a diverse array of Washingtonians in different ways. To understand the diversity of views and needs, the Department's Wolf Advisory Group (WAG) and a diversity of Department staff co-developed and unanimously agreed to this protocol. As such, this protocol represents input and considerations from numerous individuals representing Department staff, livestock producer, environmental, and hunter interests.

Per the Wolf Conservation and Management Plan (herein Plan), lethal removal may be used to stop repeated depredations when it is documented that livestock have been killed by wolves, non-lethal methods (herein deterrence measures) have been tried but failed to stop depredations, depredations are likely to continue, and there is no evidence of intentional feeding or unnatural attraction of wolves by the livestock producer. This document further describes the protocol details for implementing that overarching policy in the Plan. The lethal removal of wolves described in this document applies to areas of Washington where WDFW has full management authority of wolves.

Section 2. Definitions

Livestock means cattle, pigs, horses, mules, sheep, llamas, goats, donkeys, alpacas, guarding animals, and herding dogs¹.

¹For guarding and herding dogs specifically, confirmed deaths caused by wolves is included in the definition of livestock if, based on the investigation by Department staff, the dog was actively guarding or herding their assigned livestock herd. Confirmed injuries of a guarding or herding dog caused by wolves is included in the definition of livestock if, based on the investigation by Department staff, the dog was actively guarding or herding their assigned livestock herd, and there is one or more confirmed wolf depredations to the other livestock species in the assigned herd the dog was actively guarding or herding (i.e., the dog injury occurred as part of a pattern of depredation in the assigned herd).

Confirmed wolf depredation event means the death or injury of livestock caused by wolves, and classified as “confirmed wolf” by the Department, with supporting documentation. For depredations on large livestock (i.e., cattle, horses, mules, and donkeys), each depredated livestock equals one event, unless there is evidence in the investigation that supports multiple livestock in one event (e.g., physical proximity of livestock, reconstructive evidence). For depredations on small livestock (i.e., sheep, pigs, llamas, goats, alpacas, and guarding and herding dogs), there may be one or more livestock in one depredation event.

Section 3. Expectation for proactive deterrence measures

Livestock producers are expected to proactively implement appropriate sanitation measure(s) plus one additional deterrence measure with concurrence from the local WDFW Wildlife Conflict Specialist. Proactively means the deterrence measures are in place a sufficient amount of time prior to a confirmed wolf depredation, so that the local WDFW Wildlife Conflict Specialist believes the deterrence measures had an opportunity to be effective. Please see Section 5 for how this expectation relates to the criteria for lethal removal of wolves.

The sanitation and accompanying deterrence measure must be suited to the specific livestock operation. Some examples of sanitation measures include removing bone piles, carcass pits, or livestock carcasses, or securing these attractants by burying them or treating them with agricultural lime.

Section 4. Depredation investigations and reactive deterrence measures

Wolf depredation investigations will be conducted by two WDFW staff trained and experienced in wolf depredation investigations. In districts where staff do not have adequate training and experience, or in areas without known wolf packs, WDFW will secure additional assistance from trained and experienced sources for evaluating reported wolf depredations.

WDFW will coordinate with local law enforcement as needed to participate in investigations in order to facilitate mutual learning. In areas where wolves are listed under the Federal Endangered Species Act (ESA), WDFW will coordinate with the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) on the findings from depredation investigations and seek agreement on the determination of the investigation. WDFW may consider input from other non-WDFW sources (e.g., US Department of Agriculture Wildlife Services). However, the final determination of the investigation will be made by the WDFW staff who conducted the investigation.

Following a confirmed wolf depredation, Wildlife Conflict Specialists will work with the livestock producer to assess the local on-the-ground conditions and determine what reactive deterrence measures should be enacted (i.e., suited for the specific livestock operation, has the best chance to reduce the chance of future depredations, and feasible). The expectation is the implementation (or ramp-up) of reactive deterrence measures will occur in most situations after the first confirmed wolf depredation. Wildlife Conflict Specialists have full discretion to guide or facilitate the implementation of reactive deterrence measures by increasing engagement with the affected producer(s), deploying additional deterrence measures, and coordinating with producers and other government agencies, all without compromising human safety. Wildlife Conflict Specialists also have full discretion to evaluate the timing of de-escalation or lengthier deployment of reactive deterrence measures contingent upon wolf behavior and the proximity of livestock. Wildlife Conflict Specialists will attempt to manage the use of reactive deterrence measures consistently across packs and regions of the state.

Section 5. Criteria for lethal removal of wolves

The purpose of lethal removal is to stop wolf depredations from continuing in the near future. The Department may lethally remove one or more wolves² to stop depredations on livestock when all of the following criteria³ are met:

1. The Department has documented four or more confirmed wolf depredation events within a calendar year (defined as Jan 1 to Dec 31), or six or more confirmed wolf depredation events within two consecutive calendar years, AND
2. At least one of the confirmed wolf depredation events was livestock killed by wolves (that is, the confirmed wolf depredation events are not all injuries), AND
3. The proactive deterrence measures have been implemented and failed to prevent depredations⁴, AND
4. WDFW expects depredations to continue, AND
5. The Department has notified the public on wolf activities outlined in Section 6.

²The removal of one or more wolves would be from the pack that WDFW believes was associated with the confirmed depredation events as documented in the chronology of events in Section 6.

³Except, the Department may lethally remove one or more wolves to stop wolf depredations on livestock where extraordinary losses are documented in a short period of time by the same pack and depredations are expected to continue. For example, multiple depredation events within a week on domestic sheep, with a high number of carcasses, and depredations are expected to continue.

⁴ The proactive deterrence measures must be implemented for the Department to consider the lethal removal of wolves after four confirmed wolf depredation events within a calendar year or six or more confirmed wolf depredation events within two consecutive calendar years.

Section 6. Notifying the public of wolf activities

The Department will use the “WAG and Interested Parties” email distribution list and WDFW website to notify the public (unless otherwise noted) about wolf activities to ensure timely and transparent communication. Any member of the public can request to be included on the email distribution list by contacting the Department at Wildthing@dfw.wa.gov.

The Department will notify the public of all known wolf occurrence areas⁵, including updates to wolf pack maps on the WDFW website. The Department will also maintain a chronology of events on the WDFW website for any wolf pack with a history of wolf depredations. The chronology of events will include what pack was involved, all confirmed wolf depredations on livestock, the eligibility for compensation, and which proactive or reactive deterrence measures were deployed.

The Department will notify the public if the criteria for considering lethal removal are reached, and whether the Director is authorizing or not authorizing lethal removal, before any lethal removal actions are taken. A rationale statement will accompany this notification. To ensure the safety of the livestock producer and WDFW staff, the Department will identify the pack in which the removal will occur, but will not disclose the specific location, days of operation, nor method until the removal action is complete. Once a removal has been initiated, the Department will provide at least weekly “WAG and Interested Parties” email updates on the number of wolves removed and if the removal action will continue. After the removal action is complete, the Department will provide a final report of the removal to the public, which will include the staff recommendation details for completing the removal (the number of wolves to remove, the removal method, the expected duration), and the Director’s determination in approving, denying, or modifying the recommendation for lethal removal (see Section 7).

⁵ Known wolf occurrence areas means all know wolf packs and non-dispersing lone wolves wearing an active radio collar.

Section 7. Lethal removal action

In the event that lethal removal may need to be implemented, WDFW has full discretion to determine how best to carry out the removal.

If a pattern of depredations emerges, the Wildlife Conflict Specialists (or their supervisors) will maintain regular and timely communication with the Regional Wildlife Program Manager, Regional Director, Regional Enforcement staff, relevant Section Managers, and the Wolf Policy Lead. The recommendation for transitioning from deterrence strategies to lethal removal would be made by the affected Regional Director to the Director, after consultation with appropriate staff. The recommendation should include details for completing the removal, including the number of wolves to remove, the removal method, the expected duration, and staff who will be participating. The Director, in consultation with the Regional Director, Wildlife Program Assistant Director, and Wolf Policy Lead, approves, denies or modifies the recommendation.

The objective of lethal removal is to stop livestock depredations by removing as few wolves as possible, and would ideally be incremental, starting out with a removal of one or two wolves, then to partial pack removal, and, as a last resort, removing the entire pack (i.e., the Department would not initiate full pack removal as the first step to stopping depredations). However, the incremental approach may not always be attainable or the best strategy. In some rare situations, the Department may be able to remove specific offending pack members, but in other situations only the offending wolf pack can be identified, not the individuals who depredated. Given this complexity, the Department has full discretion on how many wolves to remove. In the event that the Department does not incrementally remove wolves, the final report (described in Section 6) will provide an explanation on why incremental wolf removal was not employed.

The Department has full discretion on the lawful methods used to lethally remove wolves in a humane manner consistent with state and federal laws (e.g., trap types, potential impacts to non-target species). The objective in terms of methodology is to use the best method available that balances human safety, humaneness to the wolves, swift completion of the removal, weather, efficacy, and cost. Likely options include shooting from a helicopter, trapping, and in some situations, shooting from the ground. Lethal removal will be completed by WDFW staff or US Department of Agriculture's Wildlife Services staff (if under agreement with WDFW to provide those services). In some situations, the Director may issue a caught-in-the-act (WAC 232-36-052) or kill permit to a livestock producer or landowner. This will be considered on a case-by-case basis. The duration of the lethal removal action varies based on method and environmental factors (e.g., weather, if other factors stop depredations), but the goal will be to complete the action in as timely a fashion as possible.