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**Agriculture & Natural Resources  
Committee**

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**SSB 5960**

**Brief Description:** Requiring the department of fish and wildlife to update the 2011 wolf conservation and management plan to ensure the establishment of a self-sustaining population of gray wolves while also ensuring social tolerance of wolf recovery.

**Sponsors:** Senate Committee on Ways & Means (originally sponsored by Senator Dansel).

**Brief Summary of Substitute Bill**

- Requires the Department of Fish and Wildlife to amend the existing wolf management plan to better address the wolf recovery rate and uneven distribution that has occurred since the plan's initial adoption.

**Hearing Date:** 3/18/15

**Staff:** Jason Callahan (786-7117).

**Background:**

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) operates under a legislative mandate to preserve, protect, perpetuate, and manage the state's wildlife. Wildlife is defined as all species of the animal kingdom whose members exist in Washington in a wild state. This includes: mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, fish, and invertebrates.

The Fish and Wildlife Commission (Commission) has the authority to identify species that are seriously threatened with extinction and designate those species as endangered. Such a species classification must be requested by the Director of the WDFW (RCW 77.12.020). The Commission may only list a species as endangered, threatened, or sensitive solely on the basis of the biological status of the species being considered. This decision must be based on the preponderance of scientific data. Species may be classified when populations are in danger of failing, declining, or are vulnerable (WAC 232-12-297).

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Once listed, the Commission must also rely on the preponderance of available scientific data when making delisting or reclassification decisions. A species may be delisted from endangered, threatened, or sensitive only when populations are, solely on the basis of the biological status of the species being considered, no longer in danger of failing, declining, are no longer vulnerable. A delisting process may be initiated by the WDFW directly or by a petition to the WDFW by an interested person that sets forth the scientific data and specific evidence supporting the delisting of the species (WAC 232-12-297).

The listing of a species by the Commission requires the creation of a management plan for the species. The management plan must identify target population objectives, reclassification criteria, an implementation plan, public education, and a species monitoring plan (WAC 232-12-297).

The gray wolf is listed as an endangered species under Washington law for the entirety of the State (WAC 232-12-014). The species is only listed as endangered under federal law in the western two-thirds of the state (areas west of Highways 97, 17 and 395). On December 3, 2011, the Commission approved a wolf conservation and management plan. According to the Commission, the plan has three key elements: recovery objectives, livestock protection, and wildlife protection.

The plan identifies three wolf recovery regions. The regions are the Eastern Washington region, the North Cascades region, and the Southern Cascades and Northwest Coast region. The plan's recovery objectives which allow the wolf to be removed from the state's endangered species list is based on target numbers and species distribution. Specifically, the gray wolf will be considered to be recovered if the WDFW documents 15 successful breeding pairs for three consecutive years which are distributed in such a way that each recovery zone is host to at least four breeding pairs. Under the plan, a breeding pair is considered a male and a female with at least two pups surviving until December 31 of their birth year. This is different from a wolf pack, which is two or more wolves traveling together. Although two wolves can constitute a pack, the WDFW reports that a pack typically consists of five to 10 individual wolves, including the alpha male and female.

### **Summary of Bill:**

The WDFW is directed to amend the existing wolf management plan to better address the wolf recovery rate and uneven distribution of wolves in northeast Washington that has occurred since the plan's initial adoption. In amending the plan, the WDFW must coordinate with the existing Wolf Advisory Group and rely on the most recent science.

The WDFW may amend the plan as it best sees fit to manage the state's wolf population. However, the amendment process must at least consider a number of possible changes. These include changing the metric for determining recovery from the number of breeding pairs of wolves in the state to the number of wolf packs, evaluating options as to proper distribution needed to be observed before recovery is declared, making changes to the existing wolf recovery zones, determining which preventative measures must be attempted prior to lethal action being authorized, revisiting the criteria for the use of lethal management, and the consideration of new data related to wolf/ungulate interactions. Any amendments are exempt from the environmental

review provisions of the State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA) and must be completed by June 30, 2017. The requirements for the WDFW to amend the wolf plan is conditional on specific funding being appropriated.

**Appropriation:** None.

**Fiscal Note:** Available.

**Effective Date:** The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the session in which the bill is passed.