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**SUBSTITUTE HOUSE BILL 1698**

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**State of Washington 68th Legislature 2023 Regular Session**

**By** House Agriculture and Natural Resources (originally sponsored by Representatives Kretz, Chapman, Lekanoff, Dent, Maycumber, Springer, Morgan, and Eslick)

AN ACT Relating to providing flexibility for the department of fish and wildlife to collaborate with local governments to manage gray wolves; adding a new section to chapter 36.01 RCW; adding a new section to chapter 77.36 RCW; and creating a new section.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF WASHINGTON:

NEW SECTION. **Sec.**  The legislature finds the majestic gray wolf to be a symbol of the wilderness and a marvel to all Washingtonians. The howl of the gray wolf, a song of nature's resilience, epitomizes their role as an apex predator. The gray wolf serves a crucial role in their ecosystem, particularly to species down the food chain. This in turn improves biodiversity, offering immense human benefits that are almost too great to be measured. The success in the revival of gray wolf populations in Washington has proven to be one of the most successful recoveries of an extirpated apex species in United States history. This should be celebrated and modeled for future recovery efforts. It is important to always look for ways to improve on our processes and further perfect our recovery efforts. In this way, other counties in our state should learn from the more successful counties that have more than achieved the lofty recovery goals placed before them. In order to maximize recovery efforts for all the vital species in Washington, we must allow those counties that have successfully recovered gray wolf populations to focus their efforts on other animals in danger of extinction.

NEW SECTION. **Sec.**  A new section is added to chapter 36.01 RCW to read as follows:

(1) The department of fish and wildlife shall manage the gray wolf as if it has been removed from state designation as endangered under RCW 77.12.020 within any county where the gray wolf is not designated under the federal endangered species act as threatened or endangered in the county or portion of the county and the following criteria are met:

(a) The state meets the recovery objective of 15 breeding pairs in the state for at least three years; and

(b) There are at least three documented breeding pairs in the county or portion of the county where the gray wolf is not designated under the federal endangered species act as threatened or endangered.

(2) When the criteria identified in subsection (1) of this section are met, the legislative body of the county must provide notice to the fish and wildlife commission and to the director of the department of fish and wildlife that the gray wolf no longer meets the criteria for state designation as endangered under RCW 77.12.020 in that county.

(3) After a county acts under subsection (2) of this section, the county must enter into an interlocal agreement with the department of fish and wildlife and any tribes within the jurisdiction to collaboratively comanage the gray wolf in accordance with a regional plan developed pursuant to section 3 of this act, including collaborating with local law enforcement to receive and investigate reports of problem animals.

NEW SECTION. **Sec.**  A new section is added to chapter 77.36 RCW to read as follows:

(1) Once a county acts under section 2(2) of this act, the department shall form a work group to develop a regional plan for gray wolf management in the county or portion of the county that meets the criteria in section 2(2) of this act.

(2) Members of the work group must include representatives of county cattlepersons organizations, representatives of county governments, a representative from a regional nonprofit organization that operates range riding and other year-round wolf and livestock conflict avoidance tactics in northeast Washington, and a representative from a conservation nonprofit. The department shall invite affected Indian tribes to participate and shall give affected Indian tribes the opportunity to review drafts of the plan before it is completed. The department is encouraged to invite representatives of the United States forest service. The department shall hire an outside third-party neutral facilitator to ensure effective functioning of the work group.

(3) At a minimum, the plan must address the following objectives:

(a) Increased cooperation with input from county governments, cattlepersons associations, and local organizations providing range riding and other conflict deterrence efforts with respect to the methods and approaches to minimizing impacts to livestock production;

(b) Minimization of livestock loss and economically costly stress on livestock and minimizing the need for lethal control of wolves;

(c) Improved responsiveness from the department on planning proactive deterrence for ranchers;

(d) Faster response time from the department when lethal control is required;

(e) Habitat improvement for ungulate populations;

(f) An improved livestock loss and damage compensation program; and

(g) Maintaining recovery objectives and an overall stable wolf population in the region.

(4) The department shall complete and implement the regional plan within six months and may revise the plan periodically as conditions change. If the work group does not reach agreement on the regional plan within six months, a minority report must be included.

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