

HOUSE BILL REPORT

SHB 1676

As Passed House:
April 29, 2015

Title: An act relating to understanding the effects of predation on wild ungulate populations.

Brief Description: Understanding the effects of predation on wild ungulate populations.

Sponsors: House Committee on General Government & Information Technology (originally sponsored by Representatives Short, Lytton, Kretz and Blake).

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Agriculture & Natural Resources: 2/5/15, 2/11/15, 2/18/15 [DP];
General Government & Information Technology: 2/23/15, 2/24/15 [DPS].

Floor Activity:

Passed House: 3/10/15, 98-0.

First Special Session

Floor Activity:

Passed House: 4/29/15, 95-0.

Brief Summary of Substitute Bill

- Requires the University of Washington's Predator Ecology Lab to conduct a peer-reviewed study assessing the health of Washington's wild ungulate population in game management units that have experienced a change in population dynamics due to the recovery of gray wolves.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE & NATURAL RESOURCES

Majority Report: Do pass. Signed by 11 members: Representatives Blake, Chair; Lytton, Vice Chair; Buys, Ranking Minority Member; Dent, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Chandler, Dunshee, Orcutt, Pettigrew, Schmick, Stanford and Van De Wege.

Staff: Jason Callahan (786-7117).

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON GENERAL GOVERNMENT & INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not a part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

Majority Report: The substitute bill be substituted therefor and the substitute bill do pass. Signed by 7 members: Representatives Hudgins, Chair; Senn, Vice Chair; MacEwen, Ranking Minority Member; Caldier, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; McCabe, Morris and Takko.

Staff: Dan Jones (786-7118).

Background:

Wildlife Management at the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife.

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 WDFW, through action by the Fish and Wildlife Commission, may identify wild animals that are appropriate game animals. Many identified game animals are also ungulates. These include: deer, elk, moose, mountain goat, bighorn sheep, and pronghorn antelope. Game species are managed according to a multi-year game management plan. The most recently adopted game management plan will be in effect from July 2015, until June 2021. Game management by the WDFW involves breaking the state up into series of distinct areas called game management units. There are over 150 individual game management units in the state.

The WDFW may also identify a species as endangered if it is determined that the species is seriously threatened with extinction in the state of Washington. This list of endangered species, which is maintained by administrative rule, includes the gray wolf. A conservation and management plan for the gray wolf was adopted in December of 2011. Under the plan, the WDFW is directed to monitor ungulate populations in areas occupied by wolves, enhance ungulate populations wherever possible, improve ungulate habitat, manage hunting to ensure sufficient prey for wolves, reduce ungulate poaching, manage wolf-ungulate conflicts, and integrate the management of ungulates and wolves on an ecological basis.

University of Washington's Predator Ecology Lab.

The Predator Ecology Lab (Lab) is a part of the Wildlife Science Program in the University of Washington's School of Environmental and Forest Sciences. The Lab conducts field work and research related to predator and prey interactions and large carnivore conservation and management.

Summary of Substitute Bill:

The Lab is required to conduct a scientific, independent blind peer-reviewed study assessing the health of Washington's wild ungulate population in game management units that have experienced a change in population dynamics due to the recovery of gray wolves. The goal of the study is to examine ungulate population trends using both historic and current data to assess whether the ungulate population is adequate to support the predation pressure that accompanies the recovery of the gray wolf. The study must take place over the course of

four years, with the majority of new data collection occurring in the first two years, and regular updates must be provided to the Wolf Advisory Group maintained by the WDFW.

There are minimum elements that the Lab must include in the study. These include: a comparison of ungulate population trends in game management units with and without wolves, a consideration of all predation pressure on wild ungulates, and the inclusion of the area known as the North Half; part of the traditional off-reservation hunting grounds of the Colville Confederated Tribe.

All results of the study must be submitted by the Lab to a blind peer review process. This process must include the solicitation of reviews from the game management agencies of Idaho, Montana, and British Columbia.

The Lab must provide the results of the study to the Legislature by October 31, 2018, with an interim report provided in October of 2016. The interim report must include a description of the research completed, a proposed work plan for the second two years of the study, and a cost estimate.

The WDFW must also supply the Legislature with a report. This report, due in January of 2016, must include any proposed changes to ungulate population management that is informed by the results of the study that are designed to maximize stability in ungulate populations and minimize predation on domestic ungulate species.

In conducting the ungulate study, the University of Washington may not retain greater than 15 percent of any funding for administrative overhead.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Effective Date: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the session in which the bill is passed. However, the bill is null and void unless funded in the budget.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony (Agriculture & Natural Resources):

(In support) Trends in ungulate populations are increasing in some game management units and decreasing in others. The state needs credible information as to whether these discrepancies are being caused by wolf predation. If so, the elements of the Wolf Conservation and Management Plan applicable to ungulate management should be invoked. Increasing knowledge of ungulate-wolf interactions is consistent with the wolf plan and can lead to better decision making.

Wolves need ungulates to survive. Wolf recovery requires there be enough non-livestock ungulates available to support wolf predation, and in some areas of the state there are more concentrated wolf populations than others. It is important to look at all predators and not just wolves.

Sound science and a holistic view of wildlife management is critical to ensuring public support of wolf recovery. Correct framing of the study is important to establish an accurate ungulate population baseline, and if done correctly, it can build on work already being done by the WDFW and by tribal biologists. However, the WDFW must be very careful of the sources they use in the study to avoid potentially biased research. Wildlife cannot be managed through a single species approach or with social sciences.

Decreasing ungulate populations has negative effects on more than just wolf recovery. Hunters are reporting less success in the field and communities that rely on hunters to fill hotel rooms are seeing less economic activity and more vacancy signs.

(Opposed) None.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony (General Government & Information Technology):

(In support) The study in this bill would provide a better understanding of the impacts of the wolf packs in Washington on ungulates, which are the wolves' primary food sources, as well as predator and prey relationships. During the development of this bill, it was learned that the University of Washington is currently conducting research on this topic on the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation, and there have been suggestions that the study should be for a longer period of time. There will be an amendment to refine the bill.

(Opposed) None.

Persons Testifying (Agriculture & Natural Resources): Representative Short, prime sponsor; Clay Schuster and Jack Field, Washington Cattlemens Association; Dave Ware, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife; Tom Davis, Washington Farm Bureau; Mark Pidgeon, Hunters Heritage Council; Karen Skoog, Pend Oreille County Commission; Dave Dashiell, Cattle Producers of Washington and Stevens County Cattlemens Association; Jim Goldsmith; and Wes McCart, Stevens County Commission.

Persons Testifying (General Government & Information Technology): Representative Short, prime sponsor.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying (Agriculture & Natural Resources): None.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying (General Government & Information Technology): None.