

SENATE BILL REPORT

SB 5354

As of February 17, 2025

Title: An act relating to providing flexibility for the department of fish and wildlife to collaborate with local governments to manage gray wolves.

Brief Description: Providing flexibility for the department of fish and wildlife to collaborate with local governments to manage gray wolves.

Sponsors: Senators Short, Dozier and Wagoner.

Brief History:

Committee Activity: Agriculture & Natural Resources: 2/17/25.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Requires the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) to manage gray wolves in certain areas as if the species has been removed from state designation as endangered when certain population criteria have been met.
- Authorizes a county meeting certain wolf recovery objectives to collaboratively comanage the gray wolf with WDFW and tribes.
- Directs WDFW to form workgroups in counties meeting certain wolf recovery objectives to develop a regional plans for gray wolf management.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE & NATURAL RESOURCES

Staff: Jeff Olsen (786-7428)

Background: Gray Wolf Management. *Federal and State Endangered Status*. Both the state and federal government maintain designations for the gray wolf in Washington as endangered or protected. Federal law lists the gray wolf as an endangered species for the

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

portion of the state located west of highways 97, 17, and 395 that run through Central Washington.

The State Fish and Wildlife Commission (Commission) has authority to classify endangered and threatened species in Washington by rule, and has classified the gray wolf as an endangered species statewide. A wildlife species may be removed from state listing when, based on the preponderance of scientific data available, its populations either: (1) are no longer in danger of failing, declining, or are vulnerable due to certain factors including limited numbers, disease, predation, exploitation, or habitat loss or change, or (2) meet target population objectives set out in a Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) developed and Commission adopted recovery plan.

State Gray Wolf Conservation and Management Plan. The Commission adopted the Gray Wolf Conservation and Management Plan (Conservation and Management Plan) in December 2011, which identifies target population objectives, management tools, reclassification criteria, an implementation plan, and a species monitoring plan. The Conservation and Management Plan identifies three wolf recovery regions: (1) the Eastern Washington region, (2) the North Cascades region, and (3) the Southern Cascades and Northwest Coast region. The recovery objectives identified in the Conservation and Management Plan to allow the gray wolf to be removed from the state's endangered species list are based on target numbers and species distribution.

The Conservation and Management Plan establishes the following criteria for wolves to be considered for state delisting:

- 15 successful breeding pairs documented by WDFW for three consecutive years, distributed so that each recovery region contains at least four breeding pairs; or
- 18 successful breeding pairs documented by WDFW, distributed so that each recovery region contains at least four breeding pairs.

Summary of Bill: Gray Wolf Management. WDFW shall manage gray wolves within any county where gray wolves are not designated under the federal Endangered Species Act as if they have been removed from listing as a state endangered species and the following two criteria are met: (1) there are at least three documented breeding pairs in the county, and (2) the recovery objective of 15 breeding pairs over three years has been met statewide.

Once the criteria have been met, the legislative body of the county must provide notice to both the Commission and the director of WDFW (Director) that the gray wolf no longer meets the criteria for state designation as endangered in that location. Upon receiving this notice, the Director must evaluate and determine whether the criteria have been met and convene a work group with a third-party neutral facilitator to develop a management plan in the location. Within six months of the notice, the Director must notify the Commission that a management plan has been completed and will be implemented.

Work Group Members. The work group must include representatives of county

cattlepersons organizations, county governments, a conservation nonprofit, and a regional nonprofit organization that operates range riding and other year-round wolf and livestock conflict avoidance tactics in northeast Washington. WDFW must invite affected tribes to participate and give affected tribes the opportunity to review drafts of the plan before it is completed. WDFW must complete and implement the plan within six months and may revise the plan periodically as conditions change. If the work group does not reach agreement on the plan within six months, a minority report must be included.

Management Plan Components. At a minimum, the management plan must address:

- 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;
- minimizing livestock loss and economically costly stress on livestock and minimizing the need for lethal control of wolves;
- improved responsiveness from WDFW on planning proactive deterrence for ranchers;
- faster response time from WDFW when lethal control is required;
- habitat improvement for ungulate populations;
- an improved livestock loss and damage compensation program; and
- maintaining recovery objectives and an overall stable wolf population in the region.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Creates Committee/Commission/Task Force that includes Legislative members: No.

Effective Date: Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony: PRO: Wolves are not recolonizing to other areas of the state. Populations are high enough to delist in NE Washington. This is a difficult issue and all people need to be at the table to help with the burden wolves are causing in NE Washington. New approaches are needed to move forward. There are regional issues with wolves that need to be addressed. Translocation of wolves to other parts of the state should be considered. Wolf attacks are impacting ranchers, with cattle not coming home, unable to graze, and losses that are too great. A new management approach is needed to mitigate attacks and impacts.

CON: The population estimates in the bill are flawed. The working group has only one conservation representative. Fragmented populations threaten the recovery of species. This approach risks politicizing wildlife management, with pressure from local interests. There should be a science based approach to wolf management. There are currently no breeding pairs in SW Washington and the NW coast. There is a robust program with with range riders and a compensation program for livestock damage. This approach guts the state plan

and turns the process over to the counties, and is too expensive.

OTHER: A county by county approach may involve as many as eight different work groups. It may be more effective on a broader scale or regional approach. Several work groups with the need to hire an outside facilitator will require additional staff and some ongoing costs.

Persons Testifying: PRO: Senator Shelly Short, Prime Sponsor; Brad Manke, Stevens County Sheriff's Office; Mark Streuli, Washington Cattlemen's Association; Kathleen McKay, K-Diamond-K Guest Ranch; Clarence Rushing.

CON: David Linn; Francisco Santiago-Ávila, Washington Wildlife First; J Rosapepe, Endangered Species Coalition; John Roskelley; Dan Paul, Humane World for Animals.

OTHER: Mick Cope, WDFW.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: No one.