

Steve Huffaker, Director
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IDFG Wolf Comments
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February 14, 2006

Thank you for the opportunity to comment. Wolf Haven International is a non-profit wolf conservation organization located in Tenino, Washington. We work for the conservation of wolves across the United States. As our immediate neighbor and the most likely source for wolf recolonization into Washington, we are particularly interested in the status of wolves and wolf management in Idaho.

By all accounts, wolf recovery in the Northern Rockies has been an overwhelming success, particularly in Idaho. With a recovered population, the movement toward state management of wolves is appropriate. However, given that Idaho has been so openly opposed to wolf recovery in the past, concerns regarding the state's future adherence to conservation measures inherent to wolf recovery should not be discounted nor taken lightly. The wolf control measure, proposed just days after the state received increased management responsibilities, seems to validate concerns about the future of the wolf population in Idaho and how it will be managed.

According to the Effects of Wolf Predation on North Central Idaho Elk Populations document released by the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, elk populations in the game management units in question had been struggling long before wolf reintroduction. This document and other sources identify so many variables, both human-caused and acts of nature, that are affecting the elk population in the Lolo elk management zone of the Clearwater region. They include, but are not limited to, natural catastrophic habitat changes (long-term positive influences like large wildfires, short-term negative influences like an unusually hard winter), non-native noxious weed invasion, natural resource extraction, predation by humans and other carnivores and the building of Dworshak dam. The resulting change in habitat seems to be the primary limiting factor for the Lolo elk population.

If the Idaho Department of Fish and Game's (IDFG) management objectives for elk are based on the elevated levels that occurred subsequent to the wildfires of the early 1900's, then the management objectives are most likely unrealistic. Given that the Department of Fish and Game receives a substantial percentage of its revenue from the sale of hunting and fishing licenses and tags, the preoccupation with maintaining high numbers of game species, at realistic levels or not, is understandable. However, true scientific investigation needs to be conducted in the absence of such obvious motivating factors.

Given the decline in the elk population, the collaring study is a good step in the right direction. However, the deaths of 8 out of 25 collared elk in a group of 64 amongst a population of thousands are statistically insignificant. With the large number of variables affecting this elk population, a longer study needs to be conducted to determine the true potential impact of wolf predation on the elk population.

As habitat is the primary limiting factor, perhaps the focus of increasing the elk population should remain there. Habitat restoration will also benefit other wildlife.

As it is the intention and desire of IDFG to control wolf populations with a hunting season once they are removed from the protections of the Endangered Species Act, patience is the best course of action at this time. The state has loudly complained about the cost associated with managing “federal” wolves. A large-scale wolf kill such as the one proposed for the Lolo zone will not be inexpensive. As the delisting proposal was recently released by USFWS, the desired hunting season may be able to occur in the not-to-distant future. With patience, wolf control could end up as a revenue generator rather than a revenue drain for IDFG.

It is noteworthy that the Nez Perce Tribe has come out against the proposed wolf control plan. The tribe has played a significant role in the restoration and management of Idaho wolves since their reintroduction. As a group of people intimately familiar with the situation on the ground in the region, and with hunting playing an important role in their cultural heritage, they should be as concerned with status of the resident elk herd as the state of Idaho.

We do not support the proposal to eliminate 75% of the wolves in the Lolo region. It is a proposal predicated by political pressure rather than sound science. Wolf management and control is an important component of wolf recovery. Incorrectly applied, however, it is inappropriate and could potentially endanger the population once again.

To many people, survival of the wolves is as important as survival of the elk. The state of Idaho should be proud to have the second-highest population of wolves in the contiguous U.S.

Thank you for your consideration.

For Wolf Haven International,

Tami Williams
Director of Conservation