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Seahawks, Island, Ring
: counties | 365 elsewhere



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Conservationists try to stop Ore. wolf kill order

Conservation groups filed a lawsuit Thursday to stop federal wildlife agents from carrying out a state order to destroy a pair of wolves that are blamed for killing cattle in northeastern Oregon.

By JEFF BARNARD
AP Environmental Writer

GRANTS PASS, Ore. — Conservation groups filed a lawsuit Thursday to stop federal wildlife agents from carrying out a state order to destroy a pair of wolves that are blamed for killing cattle in northeastern Oregon.

Filed in U.S. District Court in Portland, the lawsuit argued that the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Wildlife Services should have first consulted the public and studied the environmental impacts of killing two out of the 14 wolves believed to be in Oregon.

It seeks an injunction blocking the kill order issued by the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife on two wolves from the Imnaha pack in Wallowa County.

Josh Laughlin, of Cascadia Wildlands, said they chose to target the federal agency carrying out the kill order, rather than the state agency that issued it, because they felt it was the most direct legal route to stopping the kill order.

"The wolves have since moved away from where the livestock are, and it's been a month since those killings," said Noah Greenwald of the Center for Biological Diversity. "To us, it seems like it's just punitive - a pound of flesh. It's not clear it's going to serve any function. We also feel that given how small the wolf population is - roughly 14 wolves in Oregon - that they can't sustain this kind of killing."

Laughlin added that if a separate lawsuit in Montana reverses the removal of the wolf from federal endangered species protection in eastern Oregon, the state kill order could be rescinded.



Oregon's first radio-collared wolf being released into the wild on May 3, 2009. (Photo courtesy of ODFW)

Wildlife Services spokeswoman Carol Bannerman said that by helping to confirm wolves are responsible for a particular livestock killing and removing the wolves responsible, it can help build acceptance of the return of wolves to an area.

Wiped out in Oregon by bounty hunters more than 60 years ago, wolves first returned to the state in 1998 from Idaho, where they were introduced in a federal effort to get them off the endangered species list.

Oregon's 5-year-old wolf management plan calls for allowing gray wolves to migrate from Idaho, but to kill those that prey on livestock. The plan calls for dropping wolves from the state endangered species list in eastern Oregon once four breeding pairs are confirmed.

The latest kill order came after six cattle were confirmed as wolf kills in Wallowa County last spring. It spares the alpha male and female of the Imnaha pack,

the only confirmed breeding pair in Oregon, but calls for killing two wolves without radio collars if they are spotted on private pastureland in the area where the cattle were killed.

Just which two wolves are responsible is not known.

“We chose to try to take these actions with the hope that if we get these two wolves, there is the possibility there will be a change in behavior of the pack that results in them moving away from the livestock,” said Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife spokesman Rick Hargrave.

Last September the department authorized federal hunters to kill two wolves caught on camera

killing sheep in Baker County.

Bill Hoyt, president of the Oregon Cattlemen, said the wolves were targeting during the time of year when calves were born and since have moved from ranches to target elk on federal land.

“The way to strike a balance is find areas the wolf can exist without being close enough to private and public land grazing that the conflicts won’t occur,” he said. “Because of the nature of this animal and how much territory it covers, that’s very difficult to do.”

Laughlin said conservationists were not happy with the way Fish and Wildlife has been putting the wolf management plan into action, and would be working to change it as it goes through a revision process this year.