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# Activists hope for wolf re-colonization in Pacific NW

by Andy Rieber - WLJ Correspondent

Since gray wolves were reintroduced into northern Idaho in 1994, the rapidly expanding wolf population has mainly been a worry for inter-mountain and northwestern ranchers. Though the impact of wolves on ranching is clearly on the increase—new packs have been established in eastern Washington and Oregon while states like Idaho, Montana and Wyoming have estimated combined populations of 1,300—it is still possible to view wolf-livestock conflict as a regional problem.

For the moment, that is. But last year when a lone wolf, now famous as OR-7, split from Oregon's Imnaha pack and crossed into California, the imagination of the public was ignited. The first wolf known to tread in the Golden State since 1924, OR-7 for the last year has demonstrated by his roaming the impressive capacity for travel and territorial expansion of his species. It's no wonder that California's celebrity wolf has got people thinking. Regardless of whether you're talking to concerned ranchers or ecstatic environmentalists, the question on the minds of many westerners has been the same: How far will wolves spread?

At this stage, no one can be sure. But preliminary steps are under way to prepare for an influx of gray wolves into the Pacific Northwest—and beyond.

On Dec. 21, nearly the one-year anniversary of OR-7's celebrated crossing from Oregon into California, the Center for Biological Diversity (CBD) announced the creation of The Pacific Wolf Coalition, an alliance of 25 environmental organizations dedicated to seeing wolves reestablished in existing habitat throughout the Pacific Northwest.

"We would like to see them back; they are a native species," said Amaroq Weiss, West Coast wolf organizer for CBD.

Outside of the Rocky Mountain and Great Lakes regions, wolves are still listed as federally endangered throughout the lower 48 states. This includes the central and western portions of Oregon and Washington, as well as all of California—areas that are increasingly likely to become new stomping grounds of the large predators as their numbers increase.

Weiss explained that members of the coalition are concerned that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) is preparing to lift the federally protected status in these areas by issuing a new rule as the outcome of a recent status review of the species. "We don't think that's an appropriate conclusion because wolves only exist now in tiny percentages of what their former range is," Weiss said. "There is still lots of good wolf habitat in lots of places."

In response, members of the coalition have been taking measures to ensure that as wolves continue to expand into the Pacific Northwest, they will receive the maximum amount of state and federal protection.

Last February, CBD petitioned the California Fish and Game Commission to list the gray wolf as endangered under the California Endangered Species Act, which would guarantee the wolf protection regardless of whether the federal listing is lifted.

"That's ... something that we'd like to see happen, particularly since the federal government is releasing its proposed rule, and we expect what the proposed rule will be is to remove protection for wolves here," said Weiss. "If there is no federal listing for wolves under the ESA in this state, ...the safety net it will need will be that state listing."

But California ranchers may disagree, having observed the differing fortunes of ranchers in other wolf-populated states. Idaho and Montana, for example, currently manage wolves as a game species, allowing ranchers to protect their livestock. By contrast, Oregon and Washington both list gray wolves on state endangered species lists. This means that even in the eastern portions of those states where the wolf is federally delisted, ranchers have very limited options when wolves kill cattle or sheep—they must depend on the state wildlife agency to address the problem.

Justin Oldfield, California Cattlemen's Association vice president of government relations, has no question which model he would like California to follow.

"We are adamantly opposed to the wolf being added to the California Endangered Species listing," said Oldfield. "That would cause considerable problems here in California in dealing with the management of the population in the long term."

As the spread of wolves into California becomes imminent, however, wolf advocates and ranchers are both anticipating the need to make some compromises as the prospect of crafting a California wolf plan looms on the horizon.

It appears, however, that California is not expected to be the final frontier for wolves, according to a letter recently released by FWS to a number of county and tribal governments across the Southwest. According to the letter, FWS is preparing for the possibility of gray wolves carving out new territory as far south as Arizona, New Mexico and Texas.

"Natural dispersal into these areas is possible from source populations of reintroduced Mexican gray wolves in Mexico or from reestablished wolf populations in the northern Rocky Mountains," stated the letter, adding that "[w]ith possible wolf re-colonization comes the potential for livestock depredations and wolf-human interactions..."

The letter was accompanied by a preliminary draft environmental assessment for the implementation of a southwestern gray wolf management plan for portions of Arizona, New Mexico and Texas, as well as a draft of the plan itself.

Although Arizona and New Mexico currently host an experimental non-essential population of Mexican wolves—a sub-species of the gray wolf—the documents made clear that the plan was intended to address wolves migrating either from the Rockies or from Mexico.

FWS declined to comment on the documents, saying that they had not yet been released to the general public.

Amid the controversy, one thing seems plain: wolves probably aren't done staking out new territory. It remains to be seen how far they roam—into California, Nevada, Utah, and possibly into Arizona, New Mexico and Texas. It certainly won't happen overnight. But, clearly, FWS is taking the prospect seriously enough to have a plan in place in case it does. For wolf fans, the prospect of packs ranging from the Mexican to

the Canadian border is likely a dream come true. For ranchers, on the other hand, the vision might be a little bit closer to a nightmare.—**Andy Rieber, *WLJ* Correspondent, [andyrieber.com](http://andyrieber.com)**