

# Taking on the Wolf Killers: Wildlife Services Challenged

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In early June environmental groups filed a law suit against the euphemistically named “Wildlife Services” WS (formerly Animal Damage Control) to halt its killing of wolves in Idaho.

Last year the federal agency killed 72 Idaho wolves at the behest of ranchers, and sometimes hunters as well. In the past decade, WS has killed over 650 wolves in the Gem State. Much of this killing occurred while they were supposedly “protected” under the Endangered Species Act.

Even more galling is some of the wolves killed from planes and helicopters were in the Lolo Pass region, an area that is largely roadless. This was largely done to appease elk hunters who claim wolves are harming their hunting opportunities, even the IDFG acknowledges that changing habitat conditions are largely the reason for declining elk numbers (regrowth after large wildfires is replacing shrubs with trees).

Some of these wolf-killing methods included very inhumane procedures including strangulation with neck snares, leg hold traps with animals left to suffer for days before they were ultimately killed, and wounded animals that are left to die a slow death.

The groups, Western Watersheds Project, Predator Defense, WiidEarth Guardians, **Center for Biodiversity and** Friends of the Clearwater, contend that the USDA’s Wildlife Services has not done an adequate job of evaluating the need for, or the impact of its killing program on wolves and other wildlife. They demand the agency halt its slaughter until it updates its

management through an Environmental Impact Statement that incorporates new science.

Let's review many of the justifications for wolf control given by Wildlife Services as well as state agencies.

The first problem is the idea that there is a problem in need of solving by killing wolves. Livestock losses due to wolves are a very minor component of the annual sources of livestock mortality. For instance, in 2014 43 cattle and 103 sheep deaths in Idaho were attributed to wolf predation. But context is needed. According to the Idaho Department of Agriculture, in 2015 Idaho was home to 2,300,000 cattle and calves, 579,000 dairy cows, and 260,000 sheep and lambs.

The losses attributed to lobos are not even worth noting given how few livestock are actually killed by wolves. Why are we spending any money protecting private livestock from wolf losses? There are certainly much bigger problems facing the livestock industry than wolves—including poison plants, disease, weather, even domestic dogs kill more livestock than wolves.

If we can beyond this notion that wolves are a threat to the Idaho livestock industry, one can easily question why we are spending tax dollars at all to kill wolves. The money spent trying to kill wolves is likely greater than the value of the livestock losses. Not to mention that ranchers are compensated already for any livestock losses due to wolves.

Beyond this issue of solving a problem that does not exist, there is new science that suggests that killing wolves can actually increase livestock depredation. The reason is simple. Wolves are social animals. They work cooperatively in packs to bring down large mammals. If you kill some pack members, you reduce the efficiency of that pack in capturing prey. A pack in disarray is far more likely to kill livestock. Indeed, one study in Wisconsin

demonstrated that smaller packs were more likely to kill livestock than larger packs.

Killing wolves (or any predator) skews the population towards younger animals. Younger animals are less skillful at hunting and often less wary. Both of which can contribute to greater human conflicts.

Another argument given for killing wolves is hunter appeasement. The idea is that if you kill wolves—as Wildlife Services is doing in the Lolo Pass area—you will garner more tolerance for wolves among hunters.

Yet research, again in Wisconsin, calls into question that assertion. There, once wolves were delisted from the Endangered Species Act and state initiated a hunting season, acceptance of wolves among hunters actually declined. Another recent study also showed that poaching of wolves actually increased as well.

A third argument given for wolf killings is that without legal control wolves will decimate wild prey populations. The evidence does not substantiate this claim. In Montana in 1992, there were 89,000 elk in the state, and in 2016 their numbers had risen to 167,000 despite the presence of 500-600 wolves. Idaho has seen similar outcomes. In 2014 hunters killed 12,000 more deer than any time since 1992 and more elk since 2005. What this suggests is that hunting opportunity is certainly not hurting due to the presence of wolves.

The justifications for lethal wolf control simply do not exist. And why US taxpayers should be spending our tax dollars to kill an animal that only recently was taken off the Endangered Species list begs answers.

Hopefully the law suit will force Wildlife Services to evaluate its underlying assumptions and conclude its war on predators is no longer valid. If it

merely rehashes its same old justifications, than this is one agency that taxpayers should no longer support with our hard earned dollars.