

Opinion: Washington's wolves deserve better than a bullet, Gov. Inslee

Northeast Washington's wild public lands are full of rocky slopes and forested valleys. It's perfect habitat for our state's endangered wolves. But this rough, unpredictable terrain offers little if any prime grazing grounds for cattle.

Yet the for-profit livestock industry still insists on letting loose its cattle in public areas completely inappropriate for cows — knowing they'll lose some as a result. And state wildlife managers have gunned down nearly two dozen wolves to placate ranchers who don't want to share the landscape with these magnificent animals.

Washington residents have spoken loud and clear in support of wolves, with 71 percent of those polled saying they support recovery in the state. Now, we need Gov. Inslee to rein in his Fish and Wildlife Department and make sure no more wolves are killed here.

But the governor has failed to respond to urgent pleas from the public and conservation groups to stop the slaughter of Washington's wolves. As someone working to help restore wolves here, I'm hopeful he'll step up and end these killings.

Meanwhile, the deaths continue. Washington and its residents became a little poorer earlier this month after the Fish and Wildlife Department decided to shoot one more of the state's beloved wolves over a livestock conflict. For the second year in a row, the department decided to kill a member of the Old Profanity Territory pack, which ranges outside Colville.

Better solutions exist. State and federal officials could find an alternate grazing allotment that isn't such fantastic wolf habitat. Allowing livestock to feed on public lands comes at little cost to the livestock industry, but it exacts a heavy toll on wolves and the people that want to see them recovered here.

The state has killed 23 wolves, a staggering 20 percent of the currently known small population of only 126 animals. Nineteen were killed to pacify a single livestock owner, and 18 of the wolves killed for him were on lands belonging to the public. These killings need to stop, and wildlife managers should meet to figure out where the best places are to graze cattle in this wild country or discuss other potential solutions to this grave problem.

We know the region is notoriously bad for livestock. Wildlife officials claim non-lethal deterrents are already being used, but the correct ones need to be used in that terrain. Just because one method is on the department's checklist does not mean it is effective for that particular location.

And deterrents need to be implemented properly. In this wolf-friendly terrain with dense forests, downed timber and otherwise sparse vegetation, cows can't find enough to eat without spreading out across the land. This makes it impossible to monitor all the cattle, stop them from getting trapped in bogs and fallen trees and prevent them from being preyed upon.

The refusal of Gov. Inslee's wildlife managers to rethink grazing allotments is part of a larger problem: managing wildlife for political and financial interests, instead of following the best available science.

Here in Washington, politicians and a deep-pocketed livestock industry are driving those decisions. This ugly dynamic, which has killed so many wolves recently, is what wiped out these animals a century ago.

By the 1930s, every known wolf in Washington was hunted down and destroyed as part of a national eradication program by the federal government. That was done on behalf of the same livestock industry now working to reverse our state's stutter steps toward wolf recovery.

Gov. Inslee must stand up for the wolves that call this wild state home — and for his constituents who overwhelmingly support wolf recovery, not killing these majestic animals.

Sophia Ressler is Washington wildlife advocate and a staff attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity. She is a Washington native with a J.D. from Pace Law School with a certificate in environmental law. She has spent her career working on a variety of issues in Washington state, from water pollution control to wildlife management and many things in between.