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Lawsuit Filed to Stop Federal, State-sanctioned Killing of Endangered Wolves

PORTLAND, Ore.— Four conservation groups sued the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s predator control branch, Wildlife Services, today for its role in killing wolves at the behest of the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW). The state has issued, and now extended to Aug. 31, a permit to the federal agency to hunt, track and kill two wolves across a 70-square-mile area in eastern Oregon. According to the conservation groups’ lawsuit, Wildlife Services never conducted the environmental analysis required to disclose the impacts of killing a substantial portion of Oregon’s wolves. Cascadia Wildlands, Hells Canyon Preservation Council, Oregon Wild and the national Center for Biological Diversity brought the suit, and are also strongly considering suing the state for its role in authorizing the kill permits.

“Oregon is big enough for people *and* wolves,” commented Greg Dyson with the La Grande-based group Hells Canyon Preservation Council. “ODFW is acting too hastily in giving Wildlife Services authority to shoot these wolves before exhausting other management options. We were left with no choice but to protect wolves in court.”

The kill order stems from recent livestock depredations by wolves in Wallowa County. In May and early June, six cattle deaths were confirmed as wolf depredations. For comparison, in 2005 — the year the wolf plan was created — *domestic dogs* killed 700 sheep and cows in Oregon, according to the National Agricultural Statistics Service. No new wolf depredations on livestock have occurred since June 4.

“Sixty years ago, we completed a sad chapter in our history by killing the last wolf in Oregon,” added Josh Laughlin of Cascadia Wildlands. “Today, we’re fighting in court to ensure that we do not repeat that history.”

According to the groups, Oregon’s wildlife agency is violating the wolf-management plan by issuing the kill permits when damage is not presently occurring, the wolves are not on the land where damage is occurring, and multiple carcass dump piles were left on ranch lands resulting in “unreasonable circumstances” that attract wolves to the area. Had Wildlife Services conducted the proper environmental analysis, the agency would have realized that wolves pose no current depredation threat and hunting them is inappropriate. The state’s wildlife department has also failed to document how efforts by ranchers to avoid depredations through nonlethal means were “deemed ineffective” or to document unsuccessful attempts to solve the situation through nonlethal means — both of which are requirements of the plan.

“Oregon’s struggling wolf population cannot sustain these killings,” said Noah Greenwald, endangered species program director at the Center for Biological Diversity. “Issuance of permits to kill these two wolves by the state of Oregon is exactly why wolves continue to need protection under the federal Endangered Species Act.”

A decision is expected soon in a separate lawsuit brought by a large coalition of conservation groups — including all the groups involved in today’s suit — seeking to restore federal protections to wolves under the Endangered Species Act. If protections are restored, the permits may be invalidated.

To date, Gov. Ted Kulongoski’s office has had little to say about the actions of his state’s wildlife agency. The governor’s Natural Resources Policy Director, Mike Carrier, stated publicly that the governor cannot respond to requests to remove the kill order.

“Is this what Governor Kulongoski wants his wildlife legacy to be?” asked Rob Klavins with Oregon Wild. “The governor who signed off on the first state-sanctioned illegal wolf kills in the state’s history?”

Oregon is currently home to a confirmed population of 14 wolves in two packs, both in northeast Oregon. The Imnaha pack of 10 is led by wolf B-300. Another pack of four wolves located in the Wenaha wildlife unit was caught on film for the first time earlier this spring. The Oregon wolf plan is currently undergoing a mandated five-year review process. Because the current population numbers fewer than 14 confirmed wolves, conservationists are working to fully fund the wolf plan and empower biologists to make decisions regarding the state-listed endangered species.

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