

Report: Wolves cost Idaho big bucks

Study estimates hunting revenue from elk killed by wolves

By William L. Spence of the Tribune

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BOISE - An updated economic analysis indicates Idaho could be losing \$7 million to \$24 million per year in hunting revenue due to the introduction of wolves.

The Idaho Department of Fish and Game provided the analysis at the request of Sen. Gary Schroeder, R-Moscow. It updates a 1994 environmental impact statement related to the introduction of gray wolves in Yellowstone.

"We've gone through this type of analysis before with chinook salmon," said Assistant Director Sharon Kiefer. "It helps illustrate for the public and the Legislature that there are economic costs to foregone opportunities."

The 1994 study assumed a statewide wolf population of about 100 animals. It estimated they would kill 1,650 ungulates per year, of which 70 percent were deer and 30 percent elk, and went on to say that "a reduction in big game animals available for harvest directly affects the available hunting opportunities. Reduced hunting opportunities translates into a reduced number of hunters and hunter days spent in the field."

Fish and Game updated the 1994 study using the current wolf population estimate of 824. Based on more recent research, it assumed 70 percent of the ungulates killed would be elk. It then extrapolated the depredation figures and estimated that Idaho wolves kill about 9,517 elk per year.

The updated study provides four estimates of the economic value of that lost resource. As outlined in a letter to Schroeder, they are:

Harvest value: The economic value of each harvested elk in Idaho is about \$8,000, including direct and indirect benefits. Consequently, if those 9,517 elk had been available to hunters, typically about 20 percent of them, or 1,903 animals, would have been harvested - representing an economic loss of about \$15.2 million.

Animal value: For the purposes of assessing damages, the Legislature has set the value of an illegally taken elk at \$750. Based on that figure, the 9,517 elk killed by wolves would be worth about \$7.1 million.

Reduced hunting opportunity (2): A 1986 U.S. Forest Service publication indicated that one day of elk hunting generated \$39.10 in economic activity. The 1994 environmental impact statement used that figure to estimate that 100 wolves would cost the state between \$572,000 and \$857,000, based on 14,619 to 21,928 days in lost hunting opportunities.

After adjusting the 1986 figure to 2008 dollars, and assuming a linear relationship between reduced hunting opportunities and wolf population, the updated study estimated the current cost of lost hunting days at between \$7 million and \$11 million.

Using a second estimate of \$127.40 per day cited by another study, the opportunity cost ranged from \$15 million to \$24 million.

"I think this at least gives us some data with some science behind it," Schroeder said of the updated study. "The two main points are that we have a lot more wolves than the biologists ever thought we'd have, and they were wrong about them eating more deer than elk.

"The question is, as wolf numbers increase, are we going to have to curtail hunting opportunities? Overall, I like seeing economic activity, because it drives tax revenue. Anytime I see something that drives business away, that's important to me."

Schroeder asked other organizations, such as guides and outfitters and tourism groups, to provide their perspective on this issue, but he hasn't heard back from them yet.

Fish and Game said it hasn't seen a significant decline in the sale of big game tags over the past decade, but it has no way of knowing if tag sales would have increased in the absence of wolves.

Kiefer said the 1994 study also used some unrealistic assumptions that would tend to inflate the calculated costs. Those assumptions were maintained in the updated study, she said, but as more specific data is collected, the cost estimates can be refined.

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