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Wolf plan sparks angry comments

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By Eric Barker of the Tribune

Washington officials hear from ranchers, hunters and others at Clarkston meeting

More frustration than support was expressed for wolves at a public meeting outlining Washington's draft wolf management plan in Clarkston Tuesday.

Several people who commented on the plan expressed fear and anger over what it will mean to live with wolves as they recolonize the state. Ranchers worried wolves will kill their livestock and herding dogs. Hunters said wolves will reduce deer and elk hunting opportunities. Others asked why Washington needs to have wolves at all.

Officials from the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife told an audience of about 60 people wolves are a fact of life and the state needs to have a plan in place if it hopes to delist the animals from state and federal protection someday.

"We need to prepare. We need to be proactive and we need to have a plan," said Harriet Allen, endangered and threatened species manager for the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. "They are coming on their own. They are here already."

Wolves are moving into the state from Canada, Idaho and Montana. There are confirmed packs in Pend Oreille County and Okanogan County and a suspected pack on the border of Washington and Oregon near the Wenaha-Tucannon Wilderness Area. More are expected to colonize the state on their own and there are no plans to import wolves from out of state.

The draft plan calls for the state to support a minimum of 15 breeding pairs of wolves before they can be considered for delisting under the state endangered species act. Of those 15 breeding pairs, a minimum of two pairs would have to be in both eastern Washington and the northern Cascades, along with five pairs in the southern Cascades/northwest Coast, plus another six at-large pairs located anywhere in the state.

Ranchers said they will be unable to watch over their livestock closely enough to prevent depredations and said their dogs are at risk from wolf attacks. Some said it will be difficult to prove wolves are responsible for lost animals and the presence of wolves will cause their animals to lose weight.

"Put them in Seattle and in the suburbs. Those are the people who want them," said Jennie Kimble of Pomeroy.

Sam Ledgerwood, a rancher from Clarkston said he will protect his dogs if they are attacked by wolves.

"I think any of you in this room would," he said. "They are working dogs. They are important dogs. We need them to do our jobs."

Glen Landrus of Clarkston said several of the state's elk herds are failing to meet the department's population objectives with none or very few wolves present. He said as wolf numbers increase the herds will struggle even more. Landrus also said wolf population targets in Idaho and Montana were far exceeded before the animals were removed from protection and he fears the same thing will happen in Washington.

At least one person commented in favor of wolves.

"I'm in favor of wolves in the state of Washington," said Fred Inaba of Pullman. "They are going to come in and there needs to be a plan."

The draft plan is open to public comment until Jan. 8. It can be viewed online at http://wdfw.wa.gov/wildlife/management/gray_wolf/mgmt_plan.html.

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