

State targets Lolo wolves

Idaho Fish & Game plans to enlist government trappers and helicopter gunners

By ERIC BARKER of the Tribune The Lewiston Tribune

An Idaho Department of Fish and Game official said Thursday the state will use aerial gunning and professional and government trappers to kill wolves in the Lolo Zone, even as public hunting and trapping seasons continue.

Dave Cadwallader, supervisor of the department's Clearwater Region, said he wants a multipronged approach to wolf control in the difficult-to-access area where elk herds are hurting.

"My goal is not to wait," he said. "Let's layer all of those tools over the top of each other and try to implement each of them."

The department's conservation officers who patrol the Lochsa River portion of the Lolo Zone are poised to begin trapping efforts in the next several days. The department is seeking to hire an experienced wolf trapper from Alaska or Canada to work in the more remote North Fork Clearwater basin, and plans to enlist the help of federal agents from the Wildlife Services agency in a helicopter-gunning exercise later this winter.

Idaho's wolf hunting season opened in late August, but only six wolves have been harvested in the Lolo Zone that includes the Upper Lochsa and North Fork Clearwater river basins.

That is far fewer than the 50 to 60 wildlife managers want to remove from the area, where elk numbers have fallen from a high of about 16,000 in the late 1980s to about 2,000 today. The steep drop is blamed on a combination of poor habitat conditions and predation from wolves, mountain lions and black bears.

Researchers from the department recently determined wolves are the primary cause of elk mortality in the zone.

This spring, shortly after Endangered Species Act protections were removed, the department used helicopter gunning to kill five. The effort was suspended because of its high cost and low success rate, which was blamed on wolves and elk moving to lower elevations where snow had melted.

This year, aerial gunning will be timed to occur when snowpacks are heavy even at lower elevations. Snow makes the animals easier to see. Cadwallader said despite the department's tight budget, due in part to the effect wolves are having on the sale of elk hunting tags, it will open its coffers to fund the controversial and expensive control method.

"Certainly everyone understands we have an issue here and we are going to have to spend some money to try to fix it," he said. "We have been told we will have some money to pay for helicopter time and wages for trappers if we can find some."

Wolves in Idaho and Montana were returned to state management last spring after Congress removed federal protections. A handful of environmental groups, including the Moscow-based Friends of the Clearwater and the larger Center of Biological Diversity are challenging that move as unconstitutional and waiting for a ruling from the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals.

Kieran Suckling, executive director of the Center for Biological Diversity called the extra wolf control measures angering and above and beyond the careful management state officials promised before delisting.

"The states were talking about measured actions and it turns out as soon as federal protection were lifted they are using every possible means they can to kill as many wolves as they can and there is nothing measured or rational about this," he said.

Brett Haverstick of Friends of the Clearwater wondered how much time and money the state would spend in its effort to kill wolves.

"What is next? Is Idaho Fish and Game going to call in the Idaho National Guard. Where are we going to draw the line and say this is one of the most rugged, beautiful and wild places left in the Lower 48, instead of spending all of this time, money and energy maybe Idaho Fish and Game should focus on 'managing' wolves in places that are less wild?"

Wolf hunting season runs through June 30 in the Lolo Zone and a four-month wolf trapping season opened last month in the Lolo, Selway and Frank Church zones and parts of the Panhandle and Dworshak-Elk City zones. Cadwallader said the department is still hopeful trappers and hunters will be successful.

Through Thursday hunters killed 153 wolves in the state and trappers had killed one. There have been 28 killed in the Dworshak-Elk City zones that stretches roughly from Elk River to Elk City, six in the Lolo Zone, two in the Palouse-Hells Canyon Zone, and four in the Selway Zone.

There is no quota on the number of wolves that can be killed during the hunting and trapping season. Department director Virgil Moore said he wants to significantly reduce the wolf population but stay comfortably above the 150 level that would cue a federal review and could lead to relisting them under the ESA.

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