

Gray wolves are protected in Washington. So why does the state keep killing them?

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Somewhere near this tiny farming town last month, a Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife hunter conducted what officials call a lethal removal, killing a gray wolf, a member of a species that the state

considers endangered.

Most likely the agency employee or contractor fired a 12-gauge shotgun from a helicopter after following signals from a radio collar on a member of the Grouse Flats pack. Citing "safety reasons," officials won't say how or where the wolf—which they now believe to have been a breeding female—was exterminated Sept. 25.

A century after [gray wolves](#) were all but eradicated from Washington, the state is trying to encourage the return of the iconic predators, which normally hunt deer, elk and smaller wild animals. The state's [gray wolf](#) population has gradually recovered to at least 126 since 2008, when the first two packs since the 1930s established dens.

But wildlife officials ordered the Grouse Flats extermination after determining that the pack roaming grasslands in the state's farthest southeast corner had killed four farm animals in two months. That's the minimum number of deaths or injuries required within 10 months for them to begin killing wolves until the livestock attacks cease.

Five days after the mother wolf was killed, Washington Democratic Gov. Jay Inslee wrote to the director of the Fish & Wildlife department, an agency accused by animal advocates of bowing to the interests of ranchers hostile to wolves. Inslee cited public outrage over the elimination of packs near the Canadian border, and asked Kelly Susewind to find ways "to significantly reduce the need for lethal removal of this species." He gave the director until Dec. 1 to report back.

The ultimatum from Inslee, who's seeking a third term as governor after dropping out of the Democratic presidential campaign, irked rural residents who often feel marginalized by politicians from Washington's more populous west side. The political divide between red and blue runs

roughly north-south along the Cascade Range, with Seattle and Olympia, the capital, holding sway over the state's eastern range country.

Jay Holzmilller, 62, is a hunter and cattle rancher in the Anatone area, the Grouse Flats pack's home territory. He pulled himself recently into the driver's seat of a tall crew-cab pickup in his tidy farmyard and gestured toward a neighboring ranch, one of two next to his woodlots and pastures where cattle were lost last summer to the pack.

Holzmilller, whose ranch-house walls are festooned with mounted heads of wild animals he's shot, is troubled by declines in elk and deer herds preyed on by wolves, bears and cougars. He said that Inslee's directive disrupts painstaking compromises reached through years of negotiations between wild-animal advocates, farmers and hunters.

Inslee nominated Holzmilller in 2013 to a six-year term on a commission that oversees the wildlife department, and then opted not to renew his appointment. The rancher feels that the commission's membership favored environmental interests.

"We're fighting for a way of life," Holzmilller said. "There's a huge concern whether our hunting culture is going to come to an end, and there's lots of us rednecks that love to do it."

Wolves began roaming into Washington during the early 2000s, after being reintroduced during the previous decade in Yellowstone National Park and central Idaho. Scientists said that adding "apex predators" would produce ecological benefits, for example culling large herds of elk whose grazing had killed trees in Washington's Olympic National Park, causing riverbanks to erode and diminish salmon habitat.

As wolves moved in as well from British Columbia, Washington developed rules designed to protect them while minimizing attacks on

livestock. By 2011, polls showed that 75% of state residents supported wolf population recovery plans.

Now, gray wolves howl in the night across broad swaths of eastern Washington, thrilling naturalists and spooking ranchers. The population has grown by an average of 28% a year since 2008, said Staci Lehman, a Fish & Wildlife Department spokeswoman in Spokane.

"We are still trying to figure out how to strike that balance between wolves, people and livestock," Lehman said.

Under the rules, ranchers are encouraged to take steps to keep wolves away from cattle, such as putting up flags and lights and dispatching range riders on horseback. When those tactics fail, officials can order lethal removals, 28 of which have occurred since 2012 in northeastern Washington's Colville National Forest, the area of chief concern to Inslee.

Lehman said that when her agency received Inslee's directive, it was already taking public comments to plan for the day when the gray wolf population has recovered and a new era of management, including hunting seasons, begins. The governor's letter "doesn't really change things for us," she said.

Activists who pushed Inslee to act were upset by an incident that occurred Aug. 16, as wolf advocates entered King County Superior Court in Seattle seeking an injunction to prevent the eradication of the Old Profanity Territory wolf pack. The hikers and environmentalists had alleged that a northeast Washington ranch was failing to take reasonable steps to protect its cattle and then summoning the wildlife agency to kill wolves.

Shortly before the hearing began, Washington state attorneys announced

that earlier that morning, the agency had killed four of Old Profanity's five remaining wolves, later saying the final wolf wasn't part of the pack. "It shows a shocking level of bad faith to finish killing the pack just hours before the court was to decide whether to order the agency to stop," said Claire Loeb Davis, a lawyer trying to save wolves.

The judge did grant the injunction, protecting other wolves in the area that had been inhabited by the pack. But controversy continues over the effectiveness of killing wolves, a practice that can backfire, according to Carter Niemeyer, a wolf expert and biologist in Boise, Idaho.

Niemeyer said that killing a breeding female—as Washington did Sept. 25, whether intentionally or not—eliminates a pack member that normally teaches pups how to hunt for wild animals instead of livestock. He said that a pack losing a female can break up, and the remaining wolves may target cattle as easier prey than wild animals when hunting alone.

On a recent Sunday, eastern Washington sheep farmer Jill Swannack passed a 5-foot-high electric fence as she arrived home from services at a century-old church in Lamont, Wash., southwest of Spokane. The Fish & Wildlife Department contributed \$30,000, about half the cost, toward three miles of fencing from funds allocated to prevent wolf attacks.

In two attacks in 2014, wolves killed four of Swannack's ewes and a guard dog. She received state compensation of more than \$23,000, mainly because about 100 ewes chased and traumatized by the attacking wolves failed to produce lambs the next spring. She said the herd she raises for wool and meat still hasn't fully rebounded, meaning that her business wasn't made whole.

"Wolves are here to stay, but we can't let them eat people's livelihoods," said Swannack, who is also a veterinarian. "That's one of the things that

Gov. Inslee is missing in this whole discussion. All we're asking for is tools to deal with this, and some of those tools are hunting, only killing those that get to be habitual livestock eaters."

Swannack said the state should also move some packs into areas of western Washington, so they'd be distributed statewide as required for wolves to be delisted as endangered and managed the way other big-game animals are. But environmentalists say that allowing wolves to disperse naturally gives them the best chance of becoming established in new regions.

Unlike other farmers who've lost livestock to attacks in remote areas, Swannack saw one of the [wolves](#) involved in the attack on her flock. "My daughter said, "Look up there, that's awful big for a coyote,"" she said.

Swannack looked up, and caught her breath. "On the hill above us was a silver gray wolf. It was a gorgeous animal."

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