

When should a cattle-killing wolf be put down? Colorado wildlife officials punt question to new advisory group

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Colorado ranchers are urging state wildlife officials to define what constitutes a wolf that chronically hunts livestock and to kill or remove a wolf that has killed several cattle in Grand County.

A [wolf](#) killed or injured seven cattle along the Williams Fork of the

Colorado River near Kremmling between April 2 and May 11, but Colorado Parks and Wildlife officials have declined to kill the wolf citing, in part, evidence that the wolf is part of a breeding pair that likely has pups.

"If this ain't chronic depredation, what is?" Conway Farrell, who has lost six cattle to the wolf, asked Colorado Parks and Wildlife commissioners during an hours-long meeting on wolf control Thursday.

Commissioners and agency staff punted the question of defining "chronic depredation" and said a newly created committee would weigh in on the definition, but not necessarily make a formal recommendation, said Reid DeWalt, assistant director for CPW's Aquatic, Terrestrial, and Natural Resources branch.

The Colorado Wolf Restoration Temporary Working Group will consist of a hired mediator, four ranchers, four wolf advocates and four representatives from CPW and the state Department of Agriculture. The group will meet three times over the summer and will also work on addressing wolf conflict as it arises and building trust between state agencies, wolf advocates and ranchers, DeWalt said. The half-day meetings will not be public.

The wolf management plan created before the December reintroduction of the endangered apex predator states government officials can kill a wolf if they determine it is "chronically depredating," or killing and injuring livestock.

"There is not a specific definition of a 'chronically depredating' pack or wolf," the plan states. "CPW program managers will make the determination as to whether a situation is characterized as chronic depredation on a case-by-case basis."

Colorado voters in 2020 narrowly passed a measure mandating the state to reintroduce wolves, which were native to Colorado but exterminated from the state in the early 1900s.

The vote—supported heavily by urban voters—has caused deep frustration among the Western Slope ranchers who opposed the measure but now must deal with its consequences. The lack of clarity around the definition of "chronic depredation" and perceived inaction in the face of continued cattle killings has further angered ranchers across the state, who worry about their income, animals and family.

Grand County Commissioner Merrit Linke questioned the purpose of a committee that won't make recommendations. Farrell said the group seemed like a delay tactic so that wildlife officials could push off defining the term until the pair of wolves believed to be denning in Grand County have time to raise their pups.

State biologists have not yet seen wolf pups but believe the pair of wolves have procreated, DeWalt said. Based on a typical wolf breeding schedule, the pups would likely be about eight weeks old now and would start traveling with their parents in late summer, he said.

Part of the reason state biologists haven't been able to visually confirm wolf pups is because some landowners in the area have stopped allowing CPW staff onto their property, Tim Ritschard, president of the Middle Park Stockgrowers Association, said in an interview.

The association in a series of letters has repeatedly asked Jeff Davis, director of Colorado Parks and Wildlife, to kill or remove the depredating wolf. But Davis has repeatedly declined.

CPW staff have given ranchers numerous tools to help scare away wolves from their property, including foxlights, cracker shells and 5

miles of fladry around four ranches, DeWalt said. The agency also issued nine permits that allow ranchers to use deterrents that could injure, but not kill a wolf, like rubber buckshot. The state also spent \$20,000 for a range rider to guard cattle from wolves during the night. The state has also hired two wolf conflict specialists and plans to hire one more.

The nonlethal methods have been working to a certain point, Ritschard said, but explosives and lights won't work forever. They become less effective once a wolf realizes they are not harmful.

Defending cattle in the area will become more complicated as herds are moved to summer pastures, which are much larger, he said. The number of cattle in the valley triples in the summer, and the animals will become more spread out.

"If we start having issues somewhere else in the county, we're going to have to hire three or more range riders," Ritschard said. "And that's just one county."

Wolf advocates applauded agency leaders for not killing the depredating wolf and urged more patience. They cited the amount of effort and taxpayer money spent to reintroduce wolves in Colorado and that nonlethal methods must be given a chance. They noted that ranchers are compensated for the [market value](#) of killed or maimed animals.

"What we're seeing is an immediate reach for guns," said Delia Malone, an ecologist and president of ColoradoWild.

State wildlife officials have confirmed wolf depredations of 11 head of cattle in Jackson and Grand counties since the December reintroduction of wolves, according to a list maintained by CPW. One repayment claim has been submitted and the state paid \$1,514 for a killed calf.

Depredation includes both kills and physical injuries.

Before the reintroduction, wolves that migrated from Wyoming killed 13 cattle, three sheep and three dogs between December 2021 and November 2023. Claims were made on all the animals and the state paid \$39,891 in compensation.

Colorado also pays ranchers for livestock depredations by other animals, like bears and mountain lions.

Last year, the state paid \$403,602 for 102 claims of livestock damage from wildlife other than wolves, the vast majority from bears and mountain lions, Colorado Parks and Wildlife documents show. Combined, the state paid for the killing or maiming by bears and lions of eight head of cattle, 66 goats and 1,031 sheep, among other species.

The killing of 11 cattle since reintroduction will not have a widespread impact on Colorado's 2.6 million cattle population, said Ryan Sedgely, southern Rockies representative of the Endangered Species Coalition.

But ranchers who have lost cattle to wolves say the market rate compensation for injured or killed cattle does not account for the future benefits that animal would've brought them nor account for the years of careful breeding that led to that animal. A heifer that produces a calf every year is worth more than its market price, they told commissioners on Thursday.

The stress of defending [cattle](#) from wolves is also taking a toll, said Doug Bruchez, whose calf was killed by a wolf in April. Some families are not letting their children do ranch work away from the house without adult supervision.

"Many of us are physically living and sleeping with our livestock," he

said.

The stakeholder advisory group tasked with helping shape the wolf management plan before reintroduction did not recommend a definition of chronic degradation that included a set number of kills because there is no research that defines a set number and there was no number that the group could agree on, said Matt Barnes, a rangeland scientist and former ranch manager, who served on the stakeholder advisory group.

Other states with wolves have a variety of policies about killing depredating wolves, he said.

CPW plans to release up to 15 more wolves in the state this winter, though agency leaders have not yet said where.

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