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Wolf Population Drops by 9% in 2024, Declining for First Time Since 2008
Report Underscores a Continuing Alarming Increase in Human-Caused Mortality

Olympia, WA – Scientists [announced today](#) that Washington’s wolf population dropped by 9% between 2023 and 2024, marking the first year-over-year decline since wolves returned to the state in 2008. Meanwhile, the number of successful breeding pairs, a significant metric for wolf recovery, plummeted by 25%.

This decline follows four years of increased wolf mortality, with 128 known wolf deaths reported from 2021 to 2024, compared to just 58 in the prior four years—an increase of more than 220%. Human-caused mortalities last year reached their highest level since 2008, with 35 known human-caused mortalities, including 19 wolves killed in tribal hunting, 7 known incidents of poaching, and 4 killed by the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (“WDFW”) in response to livestock predations.

“Unfortunately, we were not surprised to see a significant population drop this year, given alarming recent increases in wolf mortality,” said Dr. Francisco J. Santiago-Ávila, the Science and Advocacy Director for Washington Wildlife First. “Today’s report underscores the continued fragility of Washington’s wolf population and the persistent challenges we face in reaching state recovery goals.”

WDFW released its report on the 2024 wolf count at today’s meeting of the state Fish and Wildlife Commission, announcing that at the end of 2024, the state had an estimated 230 wolves in 43 packs, with 18 breeding pairs. This is down from the end of 2023, when the state had an estimated 254 wolves in 42 packs, including 24 successful breeding pairs.

This decline comes after WDFW management pushed last year to prematurely downlist wolves from state “endangered” to state “sensitive,” even though the population had not met the requirements for downlisting outlined in the state wolf recovery plan. Management’s push for downlisting was based, in large part, on the fact that the state wolf population had steadily increased for the prior 14 years.

The state Fish and Wildlife Commission refused to downlist wolves by a narrow margin of 5-4 last July. Earlier this year, state legislators introduced HB 1311, a bill to override the Commission vote with a political decision to downlist wolves. The bill did not make it out of the House Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee.

“We thank the courageous commissioners and legislators who stood up for the state’s wolves over the past year and resisted pressure from special interest groups to decrease state wolf protections,” said Santiago-Ávila.

“The 2024 report vindicates the Commission’s decision to maintain wolves as a state-endangered species, as today’s numbers reveal the precarious nature of Washington’s wolf recovery,” he said. “Washington’s wolves need more protection, not less, especially as the Trump Administration seems likely to take political action to end federal protection in the western two-thirds of the state.”

Science shows that wolf poaching levels are likely much higher than the seven incidents reported today, as a substantial proportion of poaching incidents are never discovered. Poaching has directly prevented the wolf population from reaching recovery goals, which require stable wolf populations in each of three state recovery areas. WDFW has documented the illegal killing of three of the four wolves that have ventured into the South Cascades and Northwest Coast Recovery region, the largest recovery area in the state. WDFW has confirmed that there were no known wolves in that region by the end of 2024.

Today’s report also acknowledged that WDFW had made an error in the 2023 Annual Wolf Report, incorrectly adding five wolves to the population reported by the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation. The 2023 population numbers remain controversial, as the count included unverified population estimates of wolves on the Colville Reservation. Tribal representatives told the legislature earlier this year that their count departed from the usual protocol last year by counting wolf pups, a large percentage of whom likely died by the end of the year.

Santiago-Ávila said today’s report highlights the need for the Commission to move forward with the rulemaking on wolf management, which former Governor Jay Inslee ordered them to undertake in January 2024 following a rulemaking petition by Washington Wildlife First and other wildlife advocacy groups.

“The Commission and Department must reinforce their commitment to responsible, ethical, science-based management that prioritizes coexistence, respects the ecological role wolves play, and strives to mitigate human-caused mortality, particularly poaching,” Dr. Santiago-Ávila said. “If we are to have any hope that the Washington wolf population will ever truly recover, we need to focus on protecting wolves from continued alarming increases in human-caused mortality.”

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Washington Wildlife First is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to transforming Washington's relationship with its fish and wildlife from an approach centered around consumptive use to a more democratic paradigm that values science, recognizes the intrinsic value of animals, and prioritizes protecting, preserving and perpetuating wild life.