



Oppose HB 1311: An Assault On Washington's Endangered Wolves

[HB 1311](#) is a politically motivated attack on Washington's wolves that ignores science and seeks to weaken protections before wolves have met state recovery standards, at a time when the population is small, fragile, and declining. If approved, it would signal the state's alignment with MAGA's push to dismantle protections for wolves and other endangered species.

HB 1311 would downlist gray wolves from "endangered" to "sensitive" on the Washington endangered species list, effectively reversing the Fish and Wildlife Commission's July 19, 2024, decision to maintain gray wolves as a state-endangered species. It would weaken existing protections, give the state broader latitude to kill wolves for beef producers, decrease poaching penalties, and represent a big step toward delisting wolves and allowing wolf hunting and trapping.

The bill was first introduced during the 2025 session, with supporters contending that premature downlisting was justified because the state wolf population had steadily increased and was in no danger of decline, despite rising mortality rates. That assertion was proven wrong almost immediately. Shortly after the bill died in committee, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) reported that the state wolf population had declined in 2024 for the first time since wolves returned to the state in 2008—with an overall decline of 9% and an alarming 25% decrease in the breeding pairs essential to recovery.

HB 1311 is part of a national assault on endangered species in general, and wolves in particular. It coincides with a national push by the Trump administration to dismantle protections for all endangered species, and a push by the MAGA movement to remove wolves from protection under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA). **If both state and federal attempts to target wolves succeed, Washington's wolves will be left with little protection, mortality will skyrocket, and all hope of statewide wolf recovery will be gone.**

- 1. Continuing to Support HB 1311 is an Assault on Washington's Wolves and Wolf Recovery.** HB 1311 was an ill-considered and reckless proposal during the 2025 session, but at that time, supporters could at least point to an increasing wolf population. Opponents of the bill warned that Washington's wolf population was fragile, with low overall numbers, little geographic distribution, and rising mortality rates. Our point was immediately reinforced when WDFW [announced in April 2025](#) that the state wolf population had decreased in 2024 for the first time in recent history. Those who continue to support HB 1311 in the face of this decline can no longer claim it is an honest mistake spurred by unwarranted optimism. **Now the bill is a direct assault on state wolves: an attempt to decrease their protections before the population has met recovery benchmarks, at a time when mortality rates are rising, the population is decreasing, and the chances of recovery are fading.**

2. **Washington’s Wolf Population is Declining.** HB 1311 claims that “the wolf population has grown steadily for 14 consecutive years since the first pack was confirmed in 2008.” **This is false.** For the past few years, our wolf population has shown anemic growth amid rising mortality, with WDFW’s reported population numbers called into question by sloppy reporting based on unsubstantiated data. In 2025, WDFW [reported the first decline in the state wolf population](#) since wolves recolonized the state roughly 20 years ago. The statewide population dropped by 9%, from 254 to 230 wolves, and **breeding pairs, essential to recovery, plummeted by 25%, from 24 to 18.**
3. **Wolf Mortality Has Reached Alarming Levels.** State wolf mortality has reached record levels, culminating in the entirely foreseeable decline in population last year, and continuing to put our fragile population at risk. Between 2021-2024, WDFW reported human-caused mortality of 128 wolves—32 wolves a year. By comparison, humans caused the deaths of only 96 wolves over the prior 9 years, an average of just 11 wolves a year.
4. **HB 1311 Will Exacerbate Rising Levels of Wolf Poaching.** Poaching has reached record highs, with WDFW reporting investigations into 26 wolf deaths in the past 5 years. Research suggests that one-third to one-half of wolf poaching is never discovered, meaning that poachers might have killed up to 52 wolves illegally within the last 5 years. Science also suggests that poaching rises when a state reduces wolf protections, thus signaling that wolves are no longer valued. Downlisting wolves to “sensitive” would decrease penalties for poaching at a time when it is a rising source of mortality, lowering the illegal killing of a wolf to a misdemeanor punishable by a maximum of only 90 days in jail and a \$1,000 fine.
5. **Prospects for State Wolf Recovery Are Already Grim.** Supporters of HB 1311 claim that the state wolf population is no longer in danger. **That is false.** Even taking WDFW’s deeply flawed population projections at face value, the outlook for wolf recovery is bleak. A recent, [peer-reviewed version of WDFW’s own wolf population model](#) projects that, at current human-caused mortality rates, there is only a **1–4% chance that Washington’s wolf population will achieve statewide recovery within 50 years.** These findings further underscore that the population is extremely sensitive to human-caused mortality: with a population this small, each wolf plays an outsized role in recovery.
6. **HB 1311 Would Violate State Wolf Recovery Plan.** Washington set benchmarks for downlisting in its 2011 Washington Wolf Recovery and Management Plan, but HB 1311 seeks to downlist wolves even though these minimal criteria have not been met. Before wolves may be downlisted to sensitive, the plan requires at least 4 successful breeding pairs for at least 3 consecutive years in each of three recovery zones. But there are **no wolves** in the Southern Cascades and Northwest Coast recovery zone, the largest zone in the state with the most wolf habitat. No progress has been made toward recovery in that zone: As wolves have entered that zone, they have been almost immediately killed by poachers.

- **Ignoring the Plan is Irresponsible.** WDFW staff labored over the 300-page plan for four years, reviewing the best available science, consulting with a range of constituents through a wolf working group, evaluating extensive public comment, submitting the plan for two rounds of peer review by 46 reviewers, and examining the plan through an Environmental Impact Statement under the State Environmental Policy Act. This careful work should not be disregarded lightly. Doing so would undermine the credibility of the agency’s planning efforts, demonstrate a determination to elevate politics over science, and show disrespect to the WDFW staff and the public. Granted, the plan needs to be updated to account for new science, data, and circumstances, but it should be revised using the same thorough and transparent process, not abandoned at the legislature’s whim.
7. **HB 1311 is Part of a Concerted Attack on the Fish and Wildlife Commission for Prioritizing Wildlife and Conservation.** The move to downlist Washington’s wolves began with a 2023 proposal by WDFW management that was motivated by pressure from beef producers and special interests that oppose wolf recovery, such as the U.S. Sportsmen’s Alliance. The Fish and Wildlife Commission considered the proposal for nearly a year, taking into account that it was not supported by the best available science, the state wolf plan, or applicable law. In July 2024, the Commission made the right decision to keep wolves as a state-endangered species. Since that time, this decision has become a talking point for the U.S. Sportsmen’s Alliance and other special interest groups, which claim the commission is “dysfunctional” because it does not always act at their command. Since the resurgence of MAGA, those special interests have gained momentum, successfully campaigning for the replacement of two commissioners who prioritized conservation and an unwarranted “investigation” into all but one of the remaining commissioners who voted to retain wolf protections.
 8. **HB 1311 Aligns with MAGA’s Nationwide Assault on Endangered Species.** Endangered species are under attack nationwide, as the Trump Administration steadily dismantles protections to make way for unrestrained development and exploitation. The MAGA movement is targeting wolves in particular as part of a national effort to reverse wolf recovery. HB 1311 follows the same playbook as these national efforts, including legislation sponsored by Rep. Lauren Boebert (R-CO) to remove ESA protections for wolves nationwide, which recently passed the U.S. House.

Like Boebert’s bill, HB 1311 would override existing law protecting endangered species, putting wolves in a class of their own for purely political reasons. Like Boebert’s bill, HB 1311 would ignore the best available science, which shows that wolves nationwide, and in Washington, are still in danger of extinction. Like Boebert’s bill, HB 1311 would ignore public values, [with a new poll showing that 78% of Americans support wolf recovery](#) and the continuation of protections. Both bills would likely spell the beginning of the end of wolf recovery.

9. **HB 1311 Treats Wolves Differently Than All Other State Endangered Species.** Just like Rep. Lauren Boebert’s federal delisting bill, HB 1311 would treat wolves differently from all other endangered species for purely political reasons. For no other endangered species would we consider downlisting when the total state population is only about 250 individuals. For no other endangered species would we consider downlisting when the population had not yet met the benchmarks set by a statewide recovery plan. For no other endangered species would we consider downlisting when numbers are declining, the population is fragile, and recovery is becoming increasingly unlikely.

10. **HB 1311 Would Apply a Different Law to Wolves than to Other Species.** [WAC 220-610-110](#) sets the standards and process for listing, downlisting, and delisting under the Washington endangered species law (RCW [77.12.020](#)). It provides that “endangered” wildlife is any species native to Washington that is “seriously threatened with extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range within the state.”

- WAC 220-610-110 defines “a significant portion of its range” to mean “that portion of a species’ range likely to be essential to the long-term survival of the population in Washington.” The state wolf plan examined this requirement and concluded that wolves must be established in each of the three recovery regions prior to downlisting. Washington’s wolves have not met this threshold. **Washington’s wolves are not only “likely” to become endangered in a “significant portion” of their range; they are still *extinct* in a substantial portion of their range—the entire Southern Cascades and Northwest Coast Recovery Zone.**
- WAC 220-610-110 also says that a downlisting decision must be made “solely on the basis of the biological status of the species being considered, based on the preponderance of scientific data available.” HB 1311 is not based on the biological status of wolves or the best available science; it is motivated by politics and a desire to appease the demands of the beef industry and anti-wolf special interests.

11. **HB 1311 Erects Impediments to Increasing Protections for Wolves.** HB 1311 attempts to erect artificial impediments to reconsidering the status of wolves, setting forth a legislatively designed process that departs from the rules for other species. Ironically, if HB 1311 had passed in 2025, its uplisting threshold would already have been met: The bill provides that wolves may not be reclassified as endangered “unless the population is shown to be vulnerable or declining below the population count as of the effective date of this section.” The wolf population has already sunk below the population count when HB 1311 was first proposed, and is increasingly vulnerable due to threats from all directions—including the threatened removal of ESA protections.