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Wildlife Advocates Sue Forest Service Over Rising Wolf Body Count in Washington

Twenty-six wolves killed—including the Profanity Peak Pack—due to agency’s continued preferential treatment for livestock grazing over coexistence with wildlife

Kettle Range Conservation Group and two other conservation groups filed a lawsuit Wednesday to ensure that the U.S. Forest Service protects endangered gray wolves on the Colville National Forest in northeast Washington where livestock ranching activities have incited conflict. Even after the deaths of 26 wolves since 2012, including the total destruction of both the Profanity Peak Pack and the Old Profanity Territory Pack, the Forest Service has not taken adequate preventative measures.

The lawsuit challenges the Forest Service’s revised Colville National Forest Plan for failing to manage its federally permitted livestock grazing program to avoid adversely affecting gray wolf—a species eradicated from Washington in the 1930’s. The groups are also challenging the Forest Service’s outdated livestock management plans, some as old as 44 years, for cattle grazing in the Copper Butte and Twin Sisters areas, which is where 26 wolves have been shot on the Colville National Forest since 2012, without requiring measures to prevent these wolf-livestock conflicts from recurring.

The Colville National Forest is mostly comprised of densely forested, rugged terrain—ideal habitat for native carnivores like wolves, grizzly bear, and lynx. Yet nearly 70 percent of the national forest (about 745,000 acres or 1,164 square miles) is allocated to livestock grazing, making the region the epicenter of wolf-livestock conflicts in Washington State.

In its newly revised Forest Plan, adopted in October 2019, the Colville National Forest failed to even acknowledge the gray wolf’s return to the region, yet the plan sets management directives for livestock grazing, wildlife and other uses across all the forest’s 1.1 million-acres for the next 15 to 30 years.

It is the responsibility of Forest Service leadership to protect, restore, and maintain wildlife habitat in our National Forests, but it has abdicated its authority. “Whether you love wildlife, like to hunt and fish, or enjoy beautiful trails free of manure, putting a cattle corporation’s profits ahead of all other interests is a blatantly outrageous waste of our Public Land,” said Timothy Coleman, director of Kettle Range Conservation Group.

The Forest Service’s inaction is symptomatic of a larger problem within the institutions charged with “managing” wildlife on these federal public lands, but it has chosen to blatantly ignore the changing values of the public and scientifically-backed coexistence practices that can proactively avoid and reduce conflicts between native carnivores and livestock. Science research has demonstrated again and again gray wolf’s essential contribution to ecosystem health, particularly streams and wetlands by reducing habituation and overgrazing by ungulates. This in turn benefits

wildlife like beaver that control flooding, recharge aquifers and provide habitat for fish, amphibians and waterfowl. On the other hand, cattle degrade wetlands and compete with deer, elk and other wildlife for available forage, particularly in late summer and fall.

Historically, the Forest Service has largely escaped intense scrutiny for its practices. Yet, it is this agency's actions, through the permitting of livestock grazing, that are driving the killing of wolves, grizzly bears, and other carnivores on public lands across the West. With cattle just turned out for the 2020 grazing season on the Colville National Forest, wildlife advocates don't want the fate of a new wolf pack in this territory—the Kettle Pack—to similarly hinge on whether one of them attacks a cow, wandering unattended, in this vast, heavily wooded mountain expanse.

“The gray wolf only began reclaiming its historic habitat in Washington State around a decade ago, yet the Forest Service entirely ignored the management implications of this native carnivore's return to the Colville,” explained Jennifer Schwartz, counsel for plaintiffs and staff attorney at WildEarth Guardians. “The Forest Service is legally obligated to explore measures for reducing these recurring conflicts so wolves can hold their rightful place on this forest and carry out their critical ecological role. This deliberate agency inaction is contrary to federal law.”

Plaintiffs include WildEarth Guardians, Western Watersheds Project assisted by co-counsel Advocates for the West.

It is unacceptable for Forest Service to rely on 40+ year old grazing management plans, despite a multitude of changed circumstances including return of gray wolf, changing public opinion and an influx of outdoor recreation interests that share our Colville National Forest.

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