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**Agriculture & Natural Resources  
Committee**

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**HB 1224**

**Brief Description:** Accelerating the rate of wolf recovery in Washington.

**Sponsors:** Representatives Kretz and Short.

**Brief Summary of Bill**

- Directs the Department of Fish and Wildlife to conduct a pilot project to explore active wolf recovery options, including translocations, with the goal of accelerating the restoration of wolves in Washington to a self-sustaining size and with a geographic distribution with a high probability of persevering into the future.

**Hearing Date:** 2/5/15

**Staff:** Jason Callahan (786-7117).

**Background:**

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) operates under a legislative mandate to preserve, protect, perpetuate, and manage the state's wildlife. Wildlife is defined as all species of the animal kingdom whose members exist in Washington in a wild state. This includes: mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, fish, and invertebrates.

The Fish and Wildlife Commission (Commission) has the authority to identify species that are seriously threatened with extinction and designate those species as endangered. Such a species classification must be requested by the Director of the WDFW (RCW 77.12.020). The Commission may only list a species as endangered, threatened, or sensitive solely on the basis of the biological status of the species being considered. This decision must be based on the preponderance of scientific data. Species may be classified when populations are in danger of failing, declining, or are vulnerable (WAC 232-12-297).

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*This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not a part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.*

Once listed, the Commission must also rely on the preponderance of available scientific data when making delisting or reclassification decisions. A species may be delisted from endangered, threatened, or sensitive only when populations are, solely on the basis of the biological status of the species being considered, no longer in danger of failing, declining, are no longer vulnerable. A delisting process may be initiated by the WDFW directly or by a petition to the WDFW by an interested person that sets forth the scientific data and specific evidence supporting the delisting of the species (WAC 232-12-297).

The listing of a species by the Commission requires the creation of a management plan for the species. The management plan must identify target population objectives, reclassification criteria, an implementation plan, public education, and a species monitoring plan (WAC 232-12-297).

The gray wolf is listed as an endangered species under Washington law for the entirety of the State (WAC 232-12-014). The species is only listed as endangered under federal law in the western two-thirds of the state (areas west of Highways 97, 17 and 395). On December 3, 2011, the Commission approved a wolf conservation and management plan. According to the Commission, the plan has three key elements: recovery objectives, livestock protection, and wildlife protection.

The plan identifies three wolf recovery regions. The regions are the Eastern Washington region, the North Cascades region, and the Southern Cascades and Northwest Coast region. The plan's recovery objectives to allow the wolf to be removed from the state's endangered species list is based on target numbers and species distribution. Specifically, the gray wolf will be considered to be recovered if the WDFW documents 15 successful breeding pairs for three consecutive years which are distributed in such a way that each recovery zone is host to at least four breeding pairs.

The wolf plan specifically allows the WDFW to initiate an evaluation of wolf translocations if wolves exceed the recovery objectives in one or two of the recovery regions, but not all three of the regions. A wolf translocation program would begin with a feasibility assessment and an implementation plan. After that process, all necessary environmental reviews would have to be completed and coordination with all recovery partners would have to be secured. After a translocation is executed, the WDFW would conduct a post-release monitoring program.

### **Summary of Bill:**

The WDFW is directed to conduct a pilot project to explore active wolf recovery options with the goal of accelerating the restoration of wolves in Washington to a self-sustaining size and with a geographic distribution with a high probability of persevering into the future. The pilot project must include an exploration of the feasibility of wolf translocations from one recovery zone to another, with a priority on translocations to sites with suitable habitat that is located the furthest distance from any known wolf packs and that are the least likely to be repopulated through natural species dispersion. Only state or federal land may be considered for translocation receiving sites.

The pilot project must consist of six steps. First, the WDFW must prepare a feasibility assessment for the translocation of wolves into regions where the natural dispersion of the

species has not resulted in established wolf packs. The feasibility assessment must identify the portions of the receiving region where there is an adequate amount and configuration of suitable habitat and prey available to support successful breeding pairs of wolves, with a priority to land that is forested and has low densities of people and livestock.

After the feasibility assessment, the WDFW must develop an implementation plan to determine the best methods for conducting a translocation. This includes the consideration of appropriate genetic source material, release methods, and disease testing protocols. The implementation plan must also identify a process for seeking the approval of any federal agencies for the translocation or translocations.

Once the implementation plan is complete, the WDFW must conduct any environmental reviews required under the National Environmental Policy Act or the Endangered Species Act and coordinate with other relevant federal and state agencies, tribal governments, local governments, landowners, and nongovernmental organizations.

After the actual translocation of live wolves are conducted consistent with the implementation plan, the WDFW must conduct post-release monitoring and evaluate the success of the translocation or translocations in establishing successful breeding pairs of wolves within the receiving recovery region.

The WDFW must complete the process of developing a feasibility assessment no more than six months after the passage of the bill, with the subsequent steps required on a timeline that has, as a goal, wolf translocations occurring by December 31, 2017.

A final report must be presented to the Legislature by October 31, 2018 that outlines any lessons learned and identifies plans to continue relocations and any limitations or restrictions on relocations that the pilot project identified. The WDFW must issue interim reports each year before the final report, upon the completion of each required step of the pilot project, and upon the identification of any issues that limits the WDFW's ability to actually translocate wolves.

All wolf translocations conducted by the WDFW for the purpose of recovering populations, including translocations that are part of the pilot project, are exempt from the environmental review provisions of the State Environmental Policy Act.

**Appropriation:** None.

**Fiscal Note:** Available.

**Effective Date:** The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the session in which the bill is passed.