

SENATE BILL REPORT

SB 5962

As of February 17, 2015

Title: An act relating to requiring the department of fish and wildlife to amend the existing wolf conservation and management plan.

Brief Description: Requiring the department of fish and wildlife to amend the existing wolf conservation and management plan.

Sponsors: Senators Dansel and Warnick.

Brief History:

Committee Activity: Natural Resources & Parks: 2/18/15.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES & PARKS

Staff: Curt Gavigan (786-7437)

Background: Role of the Department of Fish and Wildlife (DFW). DFW serves as manager of the state's fish and wildlife resources. Among other duties, DFW must protect, perpetuate, and establish the basic rules and regulations governing the harvest of fish and wildlife.

State Endangered Species Management Authority Generally. The Fish and Wildlife Commission (Commission) has the statutory authority to identify species that are seriously threatened with extinction and designate those species as endangered.

Under this statutory authority, the Commission adopted rules providing that it may only designate a species as endangered, threatened, or sensitive on the basis of the biological status of the species being considered. This decision must be based on the preponderance of available scientific data. DFW must write a recovery plan for endangered and threatened species, and a management plan for sensitive species. These plans must identify target population objectives, reclassification criteria, an implementation plan, public education, and a species monitoring plan.

The rules also provide that a species may be delisted from endangered, threatened, or sensitive status only when populations are no longer in danger of failing, declining, or vulnerable. The Commission must rely on the preponderance of available scientific data when making delisting or reclassification decisions.

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.

Wolf Management in Washington State. Gray wolves are currently endangered under federal law in approximately the western two-thirds of the state, with the species having been federally delisted in the eastern one-third in 2011. Wolves are classified under state law as an endangered species throughout the state.

The wolf conservation and management plan (wolf plan) was adopted in December 2011. Its stated goals are to:

- restore the wolf population to a self-sustaining size and geographic distribution;
- manage wolf-livestock conflicts to minimize livestock losses while not negatively impacting recovery;
- maintain healthy ungulate populations; and
- develop public understanding of the conservation and management needs of wolves.

The wolf plan identifies three wolf recovery regions: the Eastern Washington region; the North Cascades region; and the Southern Cascades and Northwest Coast region. The recovery objectives to allow the wolf to be removed from the state's endangered species list are based on target numbers and species distribution. Specifically the gray wolf will be considered to be recovered if DFW documents the following:

- 15 successful breeding pairs for three consecutive years, distributed so that each recovery zone is host to at least four breeding pairs; or
- 18 successful breeding pairs, distributed so that each recovery zone is host to at least four breeding pairs.

The wolf plan provides that lethal control to manage wolf-livestock conflicts may be used, on a case-by-case basis, in the following circumstances:

- there is repeated depredation clearly caused by wolves;
- non-lethal methods have been tried but failed to resolve the conflict;
- depredations are likely to continue; and
- there is no evidence of intentional feeding or unnatural attraction by the livestock owner.

Summary of Bill: DFW must amend the existing wolf plan to address the wolf recovery rate and uneven distribution of wolves.

DFW retains discretion to amend the wolf plan as it sees fit to address the growing wolf population, but must include the following:

- identification of a management result that allows recovery to be deemed successful based on a minimum number of wolves in two of the three recovery regions; and
- a change in the metric for identifying successful wolf recovery from breeding pairs to wolf packs.

The wolf plan amendments are exempt from the requirement to produce an environmental impact statement. The amendments must be complete by June 30, 2017.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Requested on February 15, 2015.

Committee/Commission/Task Force Created: No.

Effective Date: Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.