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**SENATE BILL 5354**

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**State of Washington 69th Legislature 2025 Regular Session**

**By** Senators Short, Dozier, and Wagoner

AN ACT Relating to providing flexibility for the department of fish and wildlife to collaborate with local governments to manage gray wolves; amending RCW 77.12.020; adding a new section to chapter 36.01 RCW; adding a new section to chapter 77.36 RCW; and creating a new section.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF WASHINGTON:

NEW SECTION. **Sec.**  (1) The legislature finds that Washington's gray wolf population has steadily increased for 15 consecutive years, with the most recent annual wolf report indicating a 20 percent population growth in 2023. As of the end of 2023, there was a minimum of 260 wolves in 42 packs across the state, demonstrating a sustained recovery of the species.

(2) The legislature finds that the United States fish and wildlife service, after an extensive peer-reviewed assessment using the best available science, announced in February 2024, a "not warranted" finding for petitions to list gray wolves under the endangered species act in the eastern third of Washington. This determination highlights the species' strong recovery and resilience in the region.

(3) The legislature finds that as gray wolves continue to disperse across Washington, there is a need for an incremental, localized approach to management. Regional differences in wolf populations require tailored management strategies that address specific ecological and community needs. An incremental, localized policy aligns with the state's recovery goals while balancing the ecological benefits of a thriving wolf population with the priorities of rural communities. Rural communities seek to balance environmental stewardship with other priorities, such as assuring a diversified economy that includes ranching and the protection of the public, livestock, and domestic household pets.

(4) Therefore, the legislature intends to provide localized management of gray wolves in Washington, reflecting their sustained population growth and the findings of federal and state wildlife agencies. This policy will maintain protections for the species while providing the necessary tools for effective and science-based management, ensuring the continued recovery of gray wolves and coexistence with human communities.

NEW SECTION. **Sec.**  A new section is added to chapter 36.01 RCW to read as follows:

(1) The department of fish and wildlife shall manage the gray wolf as if it has been removed from state designation as endangered under RCW 77.12.020 within any county where the gray wolf is not designated under the federal endangered species act as threatened or endangered in the county or portion of the county and the following criteria are met:

(a) The state meets the recovery objective of 15 breeding pairs in the state for at least three years; and

(b) There are at least three documented breeding pairs in the county or portion of the county where the gray wolf is not designated under the federal endangered species act as threatened or endangered.

(2) When the criteria identified in subsection (1) of this section are met, the legislative body of the county must provide notice to the fish and wildlife commission and to the director of the department of fish and wildlife that the gray wolf no longer meets the criteria for state designation as endangered under RCW 77.12.020 in that county.

(3) After a county acts under subsection (2) of this section, the county must enter into an interlocal agreement with the department of fish and wildlife and any tribes within the jurisdiction to collaboratively comanage the gray wolf in accordance with a regional plan developed pursuant to section 3 of this act, including collaborating with local law enforcement to receive and investigate reports of problem animals.

NEW SECTION. **Sec.**  A new section is added to chapter 77.36 RCW to read as follows:

(1) Once a county acts under section 2(2) of this act, the department shall form a work group to develop a regional plan for gray wolf management in the county or portion of the county that meets the criteria in section 2(2) of this act.

(2) Members of the work group must include representatives of county cattlepersons organizations, representatives of county governments, a representative from a regional nonprofit organization that operates range riding and other year-round wolf and livestock conflict avoidance tactics in northeast Washington, and a representative from a conservation nonprofit. The department shall invite affected Indian tribes to participate and shall give affected Indian tribes the opportunity to review drafts of the plan before it is completed. The department is encouraged to invite representatives of the United States forest service. The department shall hire an outside third-party neutral facilitator to ensure effective functioning of the work group.

(3) At a minimum, the plan must address the following objectives:

(a) Increased cooperation with input from county governments, cattlepersons associations, and local organizations providing range riding and other conflict deterrence efforts with respect to the methods and approaches to minimizing impacts to livestock production;

(b) Minimization of livestock loss and economically costly stress on livestock and minimizing the need for lethal control of wolves;

(c) Improved responsiveness from the department on planning proactive deterrence for ranchers;

(d) Faster response time from the department when lethal control is required;

(e) Habitat improvement for ungulate populations;

(f) An improved livestock loss and damage compensation program; and

(g) Maintaining recovery objectives and an overall stable wolf population in the region.

(4) The department shall complete and implement the regional plan within six months and may revise the plan periodically as conditions change. If the work group does not reach agreement on the regional plan within six months, a minority report must be included.

**Sec.**  RCW 77.12.020 and 2014 c 202 s 302 are each amended to read as follows:

(1) The director shall investigate the habits and distribution of the various species of wildlife native to or adaptable to the habitats of the state. The commission shall determine whether a species should be managed by the department and, if so, classify it under this section.

(2) The commission may classify by rule wild animals as game animals and game animals as fur-bearing animals.

(3) The commission may classify by rule wild birds as game birds or predatory birds. All wild birds not otherwise classified are protected wildlife.

(4) In addition to those species listed in RCW 77.08.020, the commission may classify by rule as game fish other species of the class that are commonly found in fresh water except those classified as food fish by the director.

(5) The director may recommend to the commission that a species of wildlife should not be hunted or fished. The commission may designate species of wildlife as protected.

(6) If the director determines that a species of wildlife is seriously threatened with extinction in the state of Washington, the director may request its designation as an endangered species. The commission may designate an endangered species.

(7) If the director determines that a species of the animal kingdom, not native to Washington, is dangerous to the environment or wildlife of the state, the director may request its designation as deleterious exotic wildlife. The commission may designate deleterious exotic wildlife.

(8) Upon recommendation by the director, the commission may develop a work plan to eradicate native aquatic species that threaten human health. Priority shall be given to water bodies that the department of health has classified as representing a threat to human health based on the presence of a native aquatic species.

(9) When the commission and director receive notice as described in section 2 of this act, the director must: Evaluate and determine whether the county has attained the criteria; and initiate development of a management plan pursuant to section 3 of this act for gray wolves within that county or portion of county where the criteria have been met pursuant to section 3 of this act. Within six months of the receipt of notice, the director must notify the commission that a management plan developed consistent with section 3 of this act has been completed and will be implemented.

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