

ANGUS

BEEF BULLETIN®

"The Commercial Cattleman's Angus Connection"

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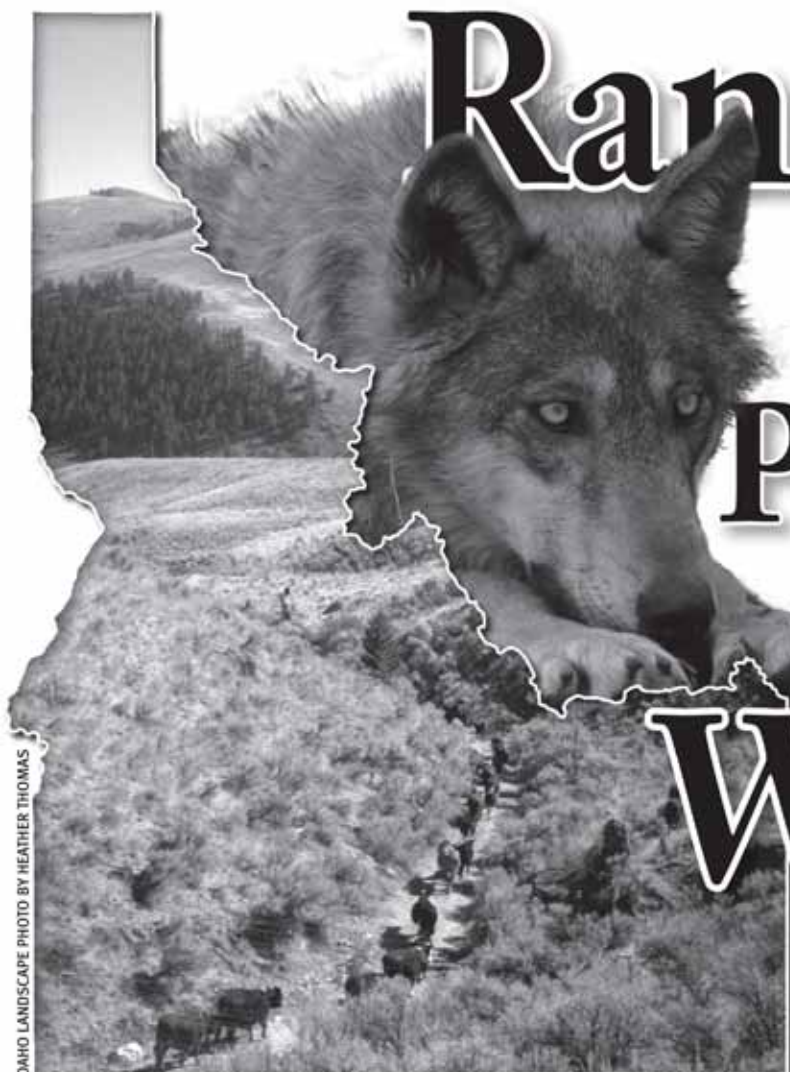
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On the Front Lines of Controversy:



IDAHO LANDSCAPE PHOTO BY HEATHER THOMAS

Ranching in the Presence of Wolves

For this Idaho ranch and others like it, the gray wolf is a surefire predator preying not only on cattle. but on the bottom line.

Story by
KIM HOLT

It was business as usual when American Angus Association Regional Manager Rod Wesselman pulled into the OX Ranch, located near Council in western Idaho, to conduct an on-site AngusSource® audit in fall 2009. His visit quickly took a different turn after ranch manager Casey Anderson mentioned he and his wife, Cindy, were participating in a collaborative research project on the study of how wolves impact beef cattle grazing behavior — in their backyard, so to speak.

The Andersons' willingness to participate in this study was tempered by their mounting frustration with the "endangered species" — 28 of them — that had taken up residence in the OX's high-mountain pastures, learning how

to stalk, kill and feed on their version of *Certified Angus Beef*®.

Wolves present new learning curve

Thirty-five gray wolves were reintroduced into central Idaho in 1995 and 1996 as part of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's 1987 endangered species recovery plan for wolves in the Northern Rocky Mountains. Since then the wolf population has survived, thrived and expanded its range within the state, much of which is considered prime wolf habitat (see map on page 2). Likewise, as wolves moved into areas with cattle and sheep ranches, the number of livestock killed or injured by wolves has increased.

Casey, who is originally from Pendleton, Ore., has lifelong ranching roots.

"When I came in 2005 to the OX,

they were experiencing some things but didn't know what to contribute it to," he says. "They could see changes with cattle behavior and grazing distribution."

He and his ranch crew had dealt with coyotes and mountain lions, but nothing like this. "You try to attribute it to things you have experience with. But it's a different learning curve with wolves," he assures.

At first, the OX crew couldn't figure out why calves were showing up with wounds that were abscessing on their knees or hocks. But after clipping the hair away, they discovered the fang marks on these calves. While these critters had gotten away, others wouldn't be as successful.

In 2008 the OX experienced its first "known" wolf depredation, and cattle kept coming up missing.

(Continued on page 2)

Ranching in the Presence of Wolves *(from cover)*

“It went from there and just exploded in 2009 because of the number of wolves,” Casey says. They would eventually discover the OX had two wolf packs bumping against its property.

Depredations mount in tough terrain

In 2009, Wildlife Services (WS), a division of the USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) charged with investigating wildlife-livestock incidences, documented 18 different wolf depredations on the OX. However, Casey and Cindy knew they were losing more calves than this.

As cows moved through the ranch up to higher pastures, they noticed in one herd — the same one being studied by researchers (see “OX assists study of wolf-livestock interactions,” page 4) — that there were a lot of cows in various stages of drying up, an indication they’d just previously lost calves. Furthermore, these cows were on mountain pastures where the OX was incurring a large amount of wolf activity.

As Casey and Cindy monitored scat (wolf manure) for the research study, their monitoring told a similar story.

"In that area where those cattle were," Casey explains, "we were finding on a road in a 6-mile loop as many as 20 new piles of wolf manure every other day. In that wolf manure would be solid black hair, calf hooves and calf dewclaws." He and Cindy documented this as "CAB" in their notes.

While they were certain of their losses, they didn't know how many. That's because on the OX, as on many western ranches, cattle graze in expansive, high country in summer months. Furthermore, "If you don't find a kill within a few hours and you have a lot of wolves, there's nothing left," Casey reassures (see "Compensation available, but not always cut-and-dried," page 6).

The OX is a combination of private and public lands, totaling about 135,000 grazing acres. Cattle graze in early spring on the bottoms of Hell's Canyon by the Snake River and, as spring progresses and goes into early summer, they work up out of the breaks of the river onto the Plateau, which is roughly around 4,500 feet elevation. The OX calves here in late spring; their cows are bred for a 60-day season and heifers for a 45-day season.

From there, the cattle are moved toward the end of July to the higher mountains at 6,000-7,000 feet in altitude. By September they are at about 8,000 feet. They start gathering cattle the end of September, where they come back down onto deeded property at about 4,500 feet. From here, they're moved to lower winter range.

The OX's base herd includes about 1,000 mother cows, of which all but one-third are bred to Angus bulls. It also retains the majority of its calves and runs them over as yearlings the following summer.



Casey Anderson, manager of Idaho's OX Ranch, puts a face on the highly emotional and controversial gray wolf issue that many Idaho ranchers continue to face. While he admits public speaking is out of his comfort zone, out of frustration he has willingly shared the OX's story of cattle production in the presence of wolves at several meetings. "When you see wolves on TV, it's a warm fuzzy thing with the mother licking its pups," he says. "They don't show the real reality of what's going on. Most people who support the wolves and their reintroduction are people who the wolves will never affect directly."

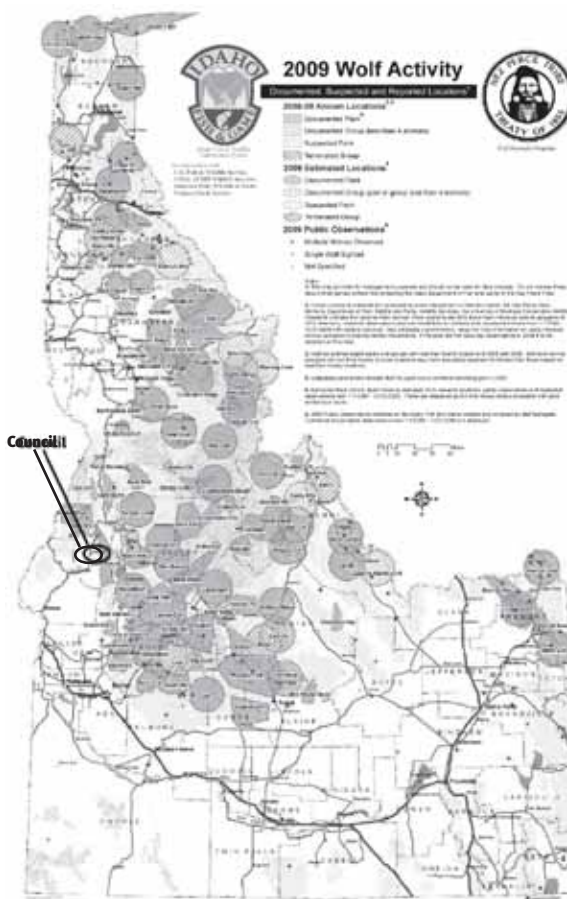


This was the OX's first "confirmed" depredation. The OX crew was gathering heifers and a bunch of calves ran back, Cindy Anderson explains. They decided to let the group settle down as they went to lunch. When they came back, a female wolf had killed this calf. "The calf drug the wolf for at least 10 yards before its insides started to fall out," she reports. Wolves are known for feeding on their prey while its still alive, often consuming the best flesh first.

Grazing lands on the OX consist of rugged mountains, steep canyons and plateaus divided by stream drainages. Grass dominates the lower elevations, while conifers dominate the higher elevations.

In these types of environments, typical of western grazing, it's more than tough to effectively implement nonlethal wolf-control measures, such as hazing by range riders or shooting with rubber bullets. In addition to the sheer expanse, the topography and vegetation of their grazing lands make it more difficult for livestock losses to be found — and easy for the elusive gray wolf to hide.

(Continued on page 4)



In 1996, 35 wolves were reintroduced into central Idaho. Sources close to this issue report that a conservative population estimate today is 850-1,000. Casey Anderson believes with the reality and remoteness of country like that of the OX, there easily could be 1,500 wolves. “Wolves are very elusive,” he says. “You don’t get to see them very often,” which is why they’re difficult to kill even with issued shoot-on-sight permits. “If you don’t have a way of controlling the numbers, this is what happens.”

Casey often visits with families who have children and dogs in tow, camping on nearby Forest Service land. He warns them of the area's wolf activity, but they look at him as if he's crazy, he says. They believe wolves are out in the wilderness, not just two hours from the city.

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Ranching in the Presence of Wolves *(from page 2)*

A cooperative study carried out by the University of Idaho, WS and the Nez Perce Tribe on the impacts of wolf predation to cattle on summer grazing allotments in Idaho's Lemhi County suggested that for every calf killed by wolves and found by the cattle producer, as many as eight additional wolf kills may have occurred without ever being detected.

Indirect expenses add up

As a result of the depredation the OX continued to incur, in 2009 WS removed 15 wolves from its rangelands and logged in 240 hours on the OX. In the aftermath of wolves, however, were production losses and the burden of added time and labor to deal with this issue neither they nor the

state of Idaho asked for.

Casey and Cindy both note the amount of time depredations tie up.

"It's amazing how much time it takes to notify the right officials, go out with them and look at the kill site," Casey states.

"When we get a wolf kill, it takes a whole day by the time you get them confirmed," Cindy adds. "It's just a nightmare, and it's very stressful."

The added stress of wolf presence in summer pastures affected the cattle as well.

Casey explains, "Really, our greatest loss is cow condition. In 2009, as we were shipping out to winter country, an observation was that the cows overall were a full body score less than normal. And that dictates back to about 100 pounds

(lb.) on a mature cow. If you were trying to put that 100 pounds back on those cattle, it would take a lot of extra time and expense.

"On top of that, our [pregnancy] rate was as low as 84% on some groups of cows. With our management practices and herd-health program, that should be 95%."

In 2009 they were short in the neighborhood of 65-75 calves; five cows and two yearlings weren't accounted for either. Before wolves were present, their normal death loss was about nine calves per grazing season.

These figures also don't include the 5-year-old and older open cows they culled — 35-40 head more than normal — because their calves were killed by wolves.

"That's the heart and soul of your herd," Casey asserts. "Those are your

most productive cows." But you can't keep them, he says, because they'll be old the next time they calve.

On top of this, they have to retain more replacement heifers to maintain their numbers, another unintended consequence with a hefty price tag.

Wounded calves add additional medicine expense, labor and losses. Often these animals can't be managed or marketed with the group.

"You'll end up with calves with bites on the sides of their ribs or in their front shoulder or in their round," Casey describes. As a rancher, it's his nature to heal them up, he says, when in reality, it'd probably be more cost-effective to put them down.

Even though the OX crew utilizes good stockmanship skills, wolf predation has changed herd behavior. Cattle are much more aggressive, are anxious and difficult to herd and handle, especially in the corral. Dogs are very valuable for moving cattle in the rough country, and their cows were dog-broke.

But now "the Angus cows are pretty darn aggressive when it comes to these wolves and the dogs," says Casey, adding he believes they can't tell dogs and wolves apart. "You might have a herd of nice gentle cows until they're exposed to the wolves, and then things really change."

Last year, without wolf pressure, the OX crew observed the cows relaxed and acted more "cow-like" when they were on lower winter country. But it still took them one to two months to adjust.

Committed to stewardship

This past year (2010) they have seen a noticeable improvement in the attitudes

(Continued on page 6)



Indicators that wolves are present include wounds like this on sides of calves and even bites on hindquarters that look like scratches. Though there may be no holes in the hide, there is tremendous damage to the tissue underneath, Cindy Anderson explains. "Most of these wounds will abscess and become very infected," Casey Anderson says wolves have very large teeth that aren't sharp, but powerful. This helps explain why they don't always leave puncture marks on the hide. To confirm a wolf bite, oftentimes a pair of clippers is needed.



"This calf was just limping when we found it," Cindy Anderson explains of a calf bit on its hip by a wolf. "Another calf was killed at the same time this one was wounded. This calf showed no signs of trauma. Then its hip abscessed. Eventually the calf had to be put down because it never could walk on its leg." As shown here, wolf bites create a tremendous amount of infection.

OX assists study of wolf-livestock interactions

As wolf populations have grown in the northern Rocky Mountains, including in Idaho, incidents of wolf predation on cattle and sheep have increased.

Rough tallies are annually made on livestock death and injury losses caused by wolf predation, but little is known about the indirect effects of wolf-livestock interactions on cattle production.

Casey and Cindy Anderson helped collect data and gather facts about the wolf presence on the OX for a research project* carried out in western Idaho-north-eastern Oregon on how cattle work the country with and without the presence of wolves.

Cattle movements and pasture usage on the OX are all recorded on computer. Therefore Casey believed he had some history that would be of assistance in this study.

"The main push for the study is to come up with alternative management plans to try to deal with the problems associated with livestock production relating to the presence of wolves," he explains. He says he believes it will be a useful tool for cattlemen and conservationists alike.

On the OX, 10 mature cows from a cow-calf herd of 450 head were fitted with GPS collars that recorded their movement data every 5 minutes. A 90-pound (lb.) male wolf from a nearby pack of 13 was also fitted with a GPS collar that recorded his movements every 15 minutes. Data was collected to determine the

timing, frequency, duration and landscape position of wolf-cow interactions at 500, 250 and 100 meters during the 2009 grazing season.

Between May 23 and Nov. 3, a 137-day duration, that one collared wolf was recorded within 500 meters of GPS-collared cattle 783 times. Interestingly, the GPS tracking data indicated the collared cows were typically widely separated from each other and only on rare occasions would two or more collared cows come together for a time.

"From this you can understand how many times all the cows in that herd are coming into contact with wolves, and why we are really noticing cattle behavior patterns and cattle distribution problems," Casey says.

He adds that researchers thought those 10 collared cows would only come into contact with the collared wolf about two or three times in that period.

"Some of this data is totally amazing," he points out. "The perimeter of this wolf's range is 55 miles. Between July 1 and 14, the least amount he traveled in a day was 6 miles; the most he traveled was 19 miles a day. In the total time he was collared, the most he traveled in one day was 29 miles." As this data shows, wolves can cover a lot of country in a short period of time.

"We have had some people on the other side of this issue really take offense to some of the scientific information we've been finding," he remarks.

This study also indicated that human presence and activity were not a strong deterrent to the collared wolf — or other wolves, in fact. During the study, the OX had 14 confirmed and probable cattle depredations in an adjacent calving pasture frequented by humans and close to ranch buildings and homes. The ranch only weaned 80% of calves from this herd, vs. 95% prior to wolf presence.

Casey further adds, "One day the collared wolf spent all day within 370 yards of where our lodge and one of our houses are on the ranch. It came right down into the orchard, within 50 yards of the lodge that day.

"We've had these wolves travel within 25 yards of our house. We have data that shows how close this collared wolf came to the different residences in this area. People would be pretty amazed if they knew how close these wolves were to their houses where they live.

"This is a misconception with most people — they think 'well the wolves, they're in the wilderness. They're not hurting anybody.' No, they're right in your backyard," he reassures.

**This research study was financially supported by the Oregon Beef Council, USDA/Agriculture and Food Research Initiative, USDA/Agricultural Research Service, Cooperating Ranches and Ranch Families, Oregon Agricultural Experiment, University of Idaho and Oregon State University.*

Ranching in the Presence of Wolves *(from page 4)*

of their cattle, given a lesser number of wolves on their grazing lands, Casey reports. “There has been a change since the number of wolves has been reduced, but we still have pressure and problems.”

They’ve sent 12 depredation reports to WS, and they’ve noted that the number of cows without calves coming through the ranch is probably 25% of their 2009 numbers. But still, any losses are “disheartening” to this ranch manager who has worked his entire life on stewardship.

“I don’t own this ranch, but I take it very personal,” Casey says.

From genetics to herd health to marketing, the OX is committed to adding value to its cattle through the chain.

“Our main goal is to take calves all the way to the end product,” Casey says. Their yearlings are fed at Beef Northwest and harvested at Tyson-Pasco.

The OX prides itself on raising good livestock, and Casey isn’t afraid to spend top dollar on Angus bulls. “Because of our records, we’ve been able to age- and source-verify these calves for a number of years,” the last two through AngusSource. “We work real closely with our veterinarians on our vaccination and health protocols,” he says.

Casey is also passionate about range management, and he was recognized for this by both the Society for Range Management (SRM) and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) during his 16-year tenure on a northern Nevada cow-calf operation.

“It’s just something I’ve spent my life doing,” he explains. “Here at the OX, the owners are very conservation-minded. It’s their priority to be good stewards.”

The OX has over a 20-year association with the University of Idaho’s range management studies, and was recently recognized as an honorary alumnus by the University for its commitment to rangeland and student engagement.

Casey describes the wolf issue as “very frustrating” because it distracts attention away from important stewardship practices such as spring development, cattle distribution and proper cattle movement.

“All these things you take great pride in,” he remarks. “It’s been the drive for many ranchers for a lot of years.” He points out, however, that it’s not just ranchers who are dealing with the effects of wolves.

“Our state’s wildlife is also suffering tremendously. Hunters have been the main conservation people of the wildlife forever. It’s affecting them, and so many decisions aren’t being based on scientific evidence.

“This whole issue is emotionally charged, political, and the trouble is the people who are making the decisions aren’t the ones who have to live with it,” Casey says.

“It’s a really tough deal,” he stresses, “and the implications go really deep for a ranching operation.”

Struggling for optimism

Casey acknowledges that some ranchers within the state have already thrown in the towel, having sold their cows, and even the ranch. But he tries to stay optimistic about the future.

Having to quit ranching would be “a pretty hard thing to swallow,” he says. “But the reality is there. If we’re not allowed to control the wolf numbers and hold some of the losses down, we’re going to end up not being a viable business.

“It’s hard to be optimistic when you see the effects it’s having on the cow herd and what it takes to deal with the problems that are associated with the wolves. And it’s really disheartening when you put in so much effort, time and money to have a good operation.

“If they would have controlled early, we wouldn’t be seeing the depredation,”

he says. “We have so far exceeded what the numbers in the state were supposed to be that that is why we are experiencing the problems we’re having. If we only had 150 wolves in the state of Idaho, we probably wouldn’t be having this discussion.”

He adds, “It doesn’t matter how many wolves there are, you’ll have problems. The thing we need people to realize is that we have a couple of years invested in our end product.”

Casey says people would have a whole different appreciation for what’s going on if they’d come out and see for themselves. But he is optimistic that the ongoing research study the OX is participating in will help shed some light on the wolf-cattle issue.

“I would like to think somewhere down the line things are going to get better,” he concludes. This is what some of us live for — to have good dogs, good cattle and ride good horses.”

A

Compensation available, but not always cut-and-dried

Compensation is available in the state of Idaho for ranches like the OX that face depredations and missing livestock, but it’s not as cut-and-dried as one would think.

Wolf depredations are classified as confirmed, probable, possible and other. Up through this past September, Defenders of Wildlife (DOW) compensated producers 50% for a “probable” kill and 100% for a “confirmed” wolf kill. The challenge therein lies in the word “confirmed.”

DOW required proof that the animal was killed and not just fed on by wolves. This entails skinning the animal to look for evidence of the kill, including the trauma area(s) and/or fang marks. The irony is if the wolf has eaten the evidence, or most of the carcass, a “confirmed” kill likely can’t be proven, even if there are wolf tracks and scat all around.

This is extremely frustrating for producers like Casey Anderson. “It’s really tough when you see calf body parts in the wolf manure,” he says. “You know exactly what it is.”

DOW had pledged to compensate ranchers until the gray

wolf was off the Endangered Species List, but backed out of its wolf depredation compensation program this past fall, after the gray wolf was re-listed as endangered in August. Now, without the DOW fund, the wolf depredation compensation responsibility falls to the state of Idaho.

Earlier this year the state of Idaho became a successful recipient of a new federal grant titled the Wolf Livestock Demonstration project, which will help the state pick up some of the slack now that DOW is no longer covering wolf-related livestock losses in Idaho. Unfortunately, the responsibility of paying for wolf-related livestock losses now defaults to the taxpayers as opposed to those groups who are fighting to keep this recovered and robust population of wolves on the Endangered Species List.

Under the state program, compensation for verified losses (confirmed and probables) are given priority and paid at market value, while compensation for unverified or missing livestock will be allocated on a pro rata basis.

A rough and rocky road

The reintroduction of the gray wolf into the Northern Rocky Mountains has proven to be a rough and rocky road littered with litigation.

Idaho cattlemen were united in opposing the reintroduction of the gray wolf into their state. “But when wolves were brought to Idaho and it was clear from the federal government that wolves were here to stay, we immediately began to work to find ways to ease the burdens that wolves brought to ranchers,” says Karen Williams, Idaho Cattle Association (ICA) policy director.

ICA worked relentlessly on the wolf issue, even holding a seat on the Idaho Fish & Game committee charged with drafting the state wolf plan. This plan, approved by the state legislature and U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS), was implemented once wolves were delisted in 2009.

This is just one reason why it was so discouraging for all — including the state, its sportsmen and livestock producers — when the gray wolf was re-listed as an endangered species for the second time, in three years, both times under court order following lawsuits

from wildlife advocates. The state of Idaho has filed a notice of appeal with the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals, seeking to overturn U.S. District Court Judge Donald Malloy’s Aug. 5 decision to re-list wolves in its state. Re-listing ends state management for both Idaho and Montana and an upcoming wolf hunt scheduled by both to curb wolf numbers.

Idaho’s first regulated wolf hunt, opened in 2009, harvested 188 of a 220 quota in a seven-month period. This hunt effectively stopped growth of the wolf population within the state, reports Dustin Miller, environmental liaison, Idaho Governor’s Office of Species Conservation in Boise. Confirmed year-to-date depredations through Sept. 30 were also lower in 2010 vs. the same period in 2009.

The federal government, and even Malloy, acknowledges the gray wolf is a recovered species in Idaho and Montana. But Malloy interpreted the ESA to read that a species must be delisted across a region; not just in different states. Wolves were still on the endangered species list in Wyoming.

At their fall convention, ICA members were brought up to speed on the issue as it now stands. Tom Perry, legal counselor to the Governor’s Office of Species Conservation, said, “The unfortunate part about the Ninth Circuit and any other route of litigation is it takes time. And time is what we don’t have right now. Even if we were to get some relief, you’re looking at least at a year and a half before you’ll get any positive decision back from that Circuit.”

Miller said that Congress is another avenue being pursued, and federal legislation is in the works by lawmakers in Idaho, Montana and Utah. “With the political shift of the election the reality is that we could gain a little more traction this next Congress on trying to get a legislative fix,” meaning an amendment to the Endangered Species Act that excludes the gray wolf.

According to 2009 USFWS data, wolves in the Northern Rocky Mountain region number 1,706 in 242 packs with 115 breeding pairs. Miller reports about 850-1,000 are in Idaho, but believes this estimate is conservative.