

When Have Wolves Made A 'Recovery?' It Depends On Your Definition.

by **Jes Burns** OPB | May 2, 2015 1 a.m. | Ashland, Oregon



File photo of a wolf in Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming.

Oregon State University

Ever since gray wolves returned to Oregon and Washington their population has been increasing steadily — especially over the past few years.

Wolves are slowly dispersing from the remote areas where the first packs got established. In the past few months, wolves have been spotted in areas that

haven't had wolves for decades, including Mount Hood, Klamath Falls and Malheur County. This week an animal thought to be a wolf was struck by a car in Western Washington east of Seattle.

Now wildlife officials are taking a look at the species' protected status. In late April, the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission initiated the process removing wolves from the state's endangered species list. Whether it will happen or not will be up to a commission vote. It could decide to completely delist, partially delist or keep current protections in place.

Why is this happening now?

Short answer: it's all part of the plan.

The longer answer is that rules for managing wolves in Oregon are laid out in the [Oregon Wolf Conservation and Management](#) plan. It's basically a road map for wolf recovery. In that plan, there are three phases – three levels of protections determined by how many breeding pairs of wolves are out there. Here's how Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife's Wolf Coordinator Russ Morgan explains it:

"It was believed that if we achieved a minimum of four breeding pairs for three consecutive years in the eastern part of the state, that would represent a population that is able to function."

So the [Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission's look at the issue of delisting](#) is required under the state plan. The Commission doesn't have to delist. But because the issue of protecting wolves evokes such strong emotions from several camps, members are already feeling public pressure both to maintain protections and to delist as soon as possible.

Four breeding pairs – why that number?

Remember that Wolf Management Plan?

Although it's based on science, it is definitely a human product – meaning it's a mixture of biology, emotion, fear, politics, economics, compassion, idealism, selfishness – all those things that add complexity to any policy question.

"Our wolf plan is very much a negotiated document," says ODFW's Morgan.

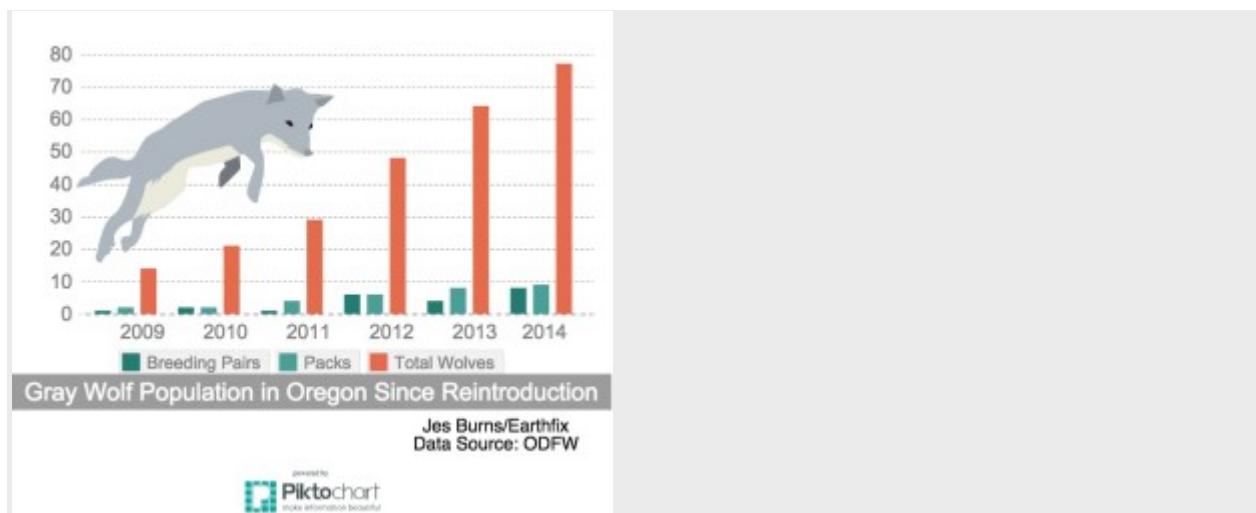
And with that in mind, he stresses that four breeding pairs is not an *optimum* number and not enough to ensure a healthy population going forward. It's just the number that triggers this review.

It's also important to remember that currently there are actually twice as many breeding pairs in Oregon, with that number expected to continue to grow relatively rapidly.

What is this "77" number that keeps getting tossed around?

That's the number of individual wolves currently confirmed to be in Oregon – a minimum number. It's also the number that many conservation groups have latched onto as a reason not to delist the wolf in Oregon.

"Would we consider delisting or reducing protections for elk or cougar or salmon or deer if there were only 77? It's not appropriate to be treating wolves differently just because they may be controversial to some people," says Rob Klavins of Oregon Wild.



The growing wolf population in Oregon.

Jes Burns/EarthFix

Does he have a point?

Yes.

Is it the only point?

No. Here's another to consider from Wolf Biologist Dave Mech, who's with the U.S. Geological Survey out of Minnesota:

"The Oregon population is really just part of a much larger population of wolves that extend back into Idaho, and up into Washington and over into Montana and Wyoming. Not to mention that all of these wolves are connected to the huge population in Canada. So you can't really think in terms of just the number of wolves in Oregon when you're speaking of a wolf population."

The wolves in Oregon don't exist in a vacuum. They travel around a fair amount. And they don't care about state lines.

The population of wolves in the Northwest and beyond — roughly bordered by the Cascades and the Rockies — is right around 1,800. So 77 wolves in Oregon may not be the best figure to latch onto, because state lines are kind of arbitrary when it comes to assessing how wolves are doing as a whole.

But what about a lack of genetic diversity and disease susceptibility of a small population?

This has been brought up by opponents of delisting the wolf as well. But Mech points out that while wolves are subject to some disease and parasites, "we have no example of a disease wiping out a wolf population."

On the genetics diversity side of things, Mech say that for the same reasons listed in the question above, wolves in Oregon are in good shape. In fact there have been examples of wolf populations in other parts of the U.S. surviving for decades with much less genetic diversity.

Are there other indications wolves are recovering in Oregon?

The population growth rate is one, says John Stephenson, Wolf Coordinator for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Oregon:

“I think it’s a tipping point in that we’re probably at the phase where wolf population growth in Oregon will get faster. It’s been almost a 30-40 percent increase a year. If that continues to occur with a bigger population, the numbers get big fast.”

The other positive indication is the increasing number wolf dispersals biologists are seeing. Young wolves from the packs in Northeastern Oregon have been going full-hobo, striking out to establish new territory and to find mates. That what OR7 did a couple years back before establishing a new pack near the Rogue Valley. Just in the past few months, dispersing wolves have appeared in the woods near Klamath Falls, in the forests around Mount Hood and rather surprisingly for biologists, in the high desert of Malheur County in the southeast.

Dispersal is a natural behavior for wolves. And it’s a sign of population growth and health.

How many wolves are enough wolves?

Depends on who you ask as much as it depends on your definition of “enough.” The [Oregon Cattlemen’s Association](#) is going to give a far lower answer than wildlife advocacy groups.

It’s a difficult number to pin down biologically as well. The Oregon Fish and Wildlife Department says right now, wolves have a 1 percent chance of going extinct in Oregon in the coming years. So if your definition of “enough” is “to not go disappear from Oregon,” then we likely have enough.

If your definition is “to reestablish populations in available habitat,” the state has a long way to go. One study of available wolf habitat in the state – meaning there’s enough food and limited chances of human conflict – put that number at over 1,400.

Wolf counts seem like a simplistic way to quantify species recovery. Is there another way to think about this?

Definitely. And much of that thinking is coming out of Oregon State University through the work of Ecologist Bill Ripple. He’s famous for his work looking at

the ecological effect of the reintroduction of wolves in Yellowstone, finding that the apex predators have a profound impact on the whole landscape, including vegetation. For example, the threat of wolves influence where deer and elk feed, allowing certain plant communities to thrive.

"I think it's important to think about ecological interactions and the functions that predators have, rather than just the total number that may be in a state, or on a landscape or in a region," Ripple says.

Ripple argues it would be good to consider "ecological effectiveness" in setting any goals for recovery. But this is all pretty squishy and difficult to quantify – meaning the number of wolves necessary to fulfill their role in the wild is unclear.

But how could this play out in policy?

You might want to consider this as a cost-benefit. Right now in Oregon, wolf depredation on livestock can be seen as a cost of reintroducing wolves. On the other side, the number of wolves in the state is so small that arguably the benefit is more psychological than anything else – Oregonians know that wolves are once again living in their state.

This is great for getting public support for wolf policy, but there's an argument to be made that boosting the population to the point of "ecological effectiveness" would create more tangible benefit - potentially things like greater riparian health improving fish habitat and populations.

This science is still relatively new, and Oregon is a very different management environment than Yellowstone. More work and study is needed. But it's beginning to provide some greater insight into the unknown benefits of wolf recovery.

At this point, what are the barriers to wolf recovery?

Wolves are actually great candidates for population recovery because they can live anywhere and eat just about anything. So as long as there's enough food, the only real barrier to wolf recovery is us.

This concept is something Dave Mech calls “social carrying capacity.” How many and where will people allow wolves to establish?

Neither Oregon nor Washington has hit its capacity. In both states the population continues to expand both in numbers and geographically. Just this week a suspected wolf was killed in Western Washington. If confirmed to be a wolf, rather than a wolf-hybrid, it will be the first verified time a wolf has crossed the Cascade Range in the state. Washington currently has 68 confirmed wolves.

Mech says this growth trend will continue until the public as a whole says no more. This comes through legislation and the actions of state wildlife managers. And this is basically what's playing out in Oregon right now, with the Fish and Wildlife Commission deciding whether or not to delist the gray wolf.