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POLICY BRIEF

The Real Cost of Coexistence: How Wolf Policies Are Failing Western Ranchers

By Pam Lewison,
Director, Agriculture Research Center

January 2026

Key Takeaways

1. There are nearly 3,500 gray and Mexican wolves scattered across the western United States.
2. Every time cattle are eaten by wolves, taxpayers reimburse ranchers for their losses. Depending on the state, that reimbursement can cost anywhere from $500 to $15,000 per animal.
3. Ranch income is negatively impacted by the presence of wolves exponentially. A 2 percent calf loss equates to a 4 percent income loss, or about $5,000, while a 14 percent calf loss equates to a 34 percent income loss for a ranch, or about $42,000.
4. States should encourage private partnerships to develop solutions to reduce predations and improve gray and Mexican wolf management.

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Introduction

Gray wolves are dangerous apex predators. Experience shows that gray wolves have negative impacts on ranchers and livestock both economically and biologically. Western states have sought to reestablish wolf populations in pursuit of making ecosystems whole but in doing so have, in some cases, ignored the need for flexibility in management practices and recovery goals over time.

Ignoring the realities of gray wolves on a given landscape is likely rooted in the popular fascination with the animals as something to be revered. In mythology, Romulus and Remus, the twins whose lives eventually became the foundation story for the establishment of Rome, were raised by a wolf after being abandoned by their mother.[1] In some Native American traditions, wolves are often viewed as teachers, guides, or spirits symbolizing loyalty, wisdom, and familial bonds. In European stories, wolves have dichotomous representation as both noble and dangerous beasts.

The complex relationships people have with wolves globally are reflected in the policies surrounding management of the predators in the western United States. Management of both the Mexican Wolf in the southwest and gray wolf throughout other western states is cumbersome. There do not appear to be coordinated efforts between states where populations are newly established and states where wolves have been present for decades. The patchwork of regulations regarding wolves and how to control their numbers has created barriers for developing cooperative partnerships and data sharing that would allow for better management in each state.

Examples of these barriers are evident across several western states. In the southwest, Mexican wolves have killed cattle and sheep as the population has significantly increased. The reintroduction of gray wolves in Colorado has already cost the state nearly $350,000 in depredation repayments to cattle ranches since their reintroduction in 2023.[2] In Washington state, the “Gray Wolf Management Plan” is approaching 15 years old.[3] Since its initial publication, it has not been updated or revised.

Solutions have been elusive because of regulation, activist opposition, or unwillingness by state officials to try new management strategies. For example, Washington state has not updated its gray wolf management procedures because the gray wolf population is considered too fragile to for new management practices to be implemented.

Activists in California have been at the heart of resistance to the development and implementation of predator management policies as packs have emerged in the Sierra Valley, killing cattle rather than other available food resources.

The relative "newness" of the packs in Colorado have created resistance to adjusting management practices, despite the clear need for change. Learning from neighboring states and developing a strategy that addresses regional similarities while leaving flexibility for individual states' needs could significantly improve the overall policy landscape.

Populations in the West

While the largest population of gray wolves in the Lower 48 is still concentrated in Minnesota, Idaho has surpassed Montana in the western U.S. for population density, reporting just over 1,200 gray wolves statewide in 2024.

Wolf Populations by State Across the West*	
Arizona	124
California	50
Colorado	30
Idaho	1,235
Montana	1,091
New Mexico	162
Nevada	0
Oregon	204
Utah	0
Washington	230
Wyoming	352
Total	3,478

Population counts represent the minimum number of wolves considered present[4567891011]

As predator populations in western states increase, now is an ideal time for states to examine their management practices and consider how they might be adapted to better suit the needs of business owners and animals alike. One potential solution to consider is the concept of "suitable habitat." Idaho's wolf management plan highlights that when wolf populations become over saturated in a specific area, "suitable habitat will be fully occupied and packs attempting to colonize unsuitable habitat would cause chronic conflict with livestock."[12] The plan notes that an over-population of wolves would reduce wildlife prey resulting in chronic conflict with livestock, necessitating the need for control of "problem wolves," or wolves habituated to predating livestock rather than wildlife.

Washington state is a prime example of a state where some regions have become over-inhabited by wolves. However, rather than focus on new management strategies that allow for management of "problem wolves," the state has opted to stick with protocols put in place by the 2011 Wolf Conservation and Management Plan. Those protocols include promotion of non-lethal deterrents – range riders, electrified exclusion fencing, frequent night checks of pastures, fladry, hazing munitions, and guard animals – and monetary compensation for livestock depredations.[13]

During Washington State's 2025 Legislative Session, House Bill 1442 would have granted local control to areas of the state where gray wolves had met the recovery requirements set in the conservation and management plan.[14] Under the auspices of the bill, local jurisdictions with "15 breeding pairs in the state for least three years; and 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" would have empowered local governments to enter into interagency agreements with the Washington State Department of Fish & Wildlife to involve local stakeholders in the development of local management strategies to maintain a stable, local gray wolf population and minimize the economic damage to local ranchers. The bill did not advance out of committee. This incremental step toward granting local management authority would have served a two-fold purpose: allowing relief to a region of the state bearing the burden of gray wolf recovery and serving as a proving ground for new management practices in an area where wolves are clearly thriving.

For several other states in the western United States, the population focus is still firmly on increasing the number of gray and Mexican wolves on the landscape to achieve what the individual state has deemed to be a sustainable wolf population. However, even states with relatively new wolf populations are having to contend with creating a sustainable population growth model while simultaneously controlling for livestock depredation. For example, in Colorado, the state's gray wolf restoration project goals include releasing 10-15 wolves annually for 3-5 years in various locations west of the Continental Divide.[15] Despite annual restoration project goals, wolves are killing livestock at a rate higher than anticipated and requiring more reimbursements than the state initially anticipated just two years into the program.

Current Cost of Co-existence

A recent study noted that livestock-wolf co-existence is expensive.[16] Authors found the when the presence of Mexican wolves on Arizona ranches decreased calf survival rate by just 2 percent, it equated to a net income loss of 4 percent for a ranch, or an average of just over $5,000. When higher calf loss levels were observed, net income loss levels increased exponentially. For example, a 14 percent calf loss rate equated to an estimated 34 percent net income loss or, approximately, $42,000. A similar argument could be made for the presence of gray wolves throughout western states where they are prevalent.

While the presence of wolves represents income losses for ranches, states also suffer the consequences of poor management decisions based upon the reimbursement protocols they employ. In its first two years of gray wolf releases, Colorado has paid out just over $44,000 in direct depredation loss payments and almost $350,000 in indirect loss payments. In Idaho, there are no payments for indirect income loss due to the presence of wolves. However, the state has paid an average of $96,600 annually between 2020-2022 for direct depredation losses to sheep and cattle ranchers. Prior to 2020, the annual average depredation payment was $98,200.[17]

Depredation Compensation Programs by State*		
State	**Department**	**Total amount available**
Arizona	Federal	$900,000
California	California Dept. of Fish & Wildlife	$600,000
Colorado	Colorado Parks & Wildlife	Up to $15,000/head
Idaho	Idaho Dept. of Fish & Game	None
Montana	Montana Livestock Loss Board	Fair market value per head
New Mexico	Federal	$900,000
Nevada	None	None
Oregon	Oregon Dept. of Agriculture	5x market value for calves, sheep, goats; 3x market value for cattle (excluding calves)
Utah	None	None
Washington	Washington Dept. of Fish & Wildlife	Up to $30,000 per ranch
Wyoming	No info available	No info available

*Individual state compensation programs vary dramatically, making averages impossible to calculate across the west[18][19][20][21][22][23]

New Strategies

Interstate collaboration and the creation of public-private partnerships are two means by which the west can better approach management concerns. Exchanging information between states like Montana, where wolf populations are well established, and Colorado, where populations are still just beginning, can improve outcomes and avoid the pitfalls of poor wolf management. All western states also have businesses, non-profits, and various governmental agencies interested in predator management that could cooperate to create an environment where wolf management is prioritized to meet recovery goals and rancher success in tandem. These are steps that may be occurring behind closed doors and not readily available for public consumption. However, if they are, they should be made public so everyone with an interest in concerted predator management can participate in those discussions and, potentially, add relevant and helpful data.

Under a west-wide intrastate cooperative approach, states would be able to maintain their autonomy in predator management decisions based on the various individual needs of each state. Rather than abdicating management decisions, states would be sharing experiential data along with successes or failures in at least the following areas:

- Predator-livestock interaction protocols
- Tangible loss compensation
- Intangible loss compensation
- Predator removal protocols
- Population recovery thresholds

As wolf populations changed over time, creating a fluid and flexible working dynamic amongst members of this west-wide working group would foster improved scientific study, communication, cooperation, and additional development of more tools for all states to use.

The current seeming piecemeal approach to wolf management, with different approaches in each state, limits application of boots-on-the-ground experiences being integrated into policy in meaningful ways. For example, recent reports from the Sierra Valley of California note livestock depredations have doubled despite efforts from wildlife officials to curb the killings.[24] Gray wolves are relatively new to the Sierra Valley, but their numbers are steadily increasing. Ranchers and state fish and wildlife officers would benefit from having a centralized information repository that may help to explain the uptick in attacks on cattle rather than wildlife and determine ways to mitigate them.

Species conservation is littered with opportunities for unique partnerships to better address the needs of everyone, allowing ranchers and conservationists to achieve their respective goals.

A prime example of a missed public-private opportunity to improve species conservation is the Tule Elk at Point Reyes in Northern California.[25] There were 14 privately owned, historic ranches operating at Point Reyes, providing seasonal habitat for Tule Elk, a species found specifically in Northern California. For generations, ranchers maintained long-term leases at Point Reyes National Park, raising beef cattle and running dairies. In turn, ranchers allowed elk to graze without interference or cost to the National Park Service. Then a trio of environmental groups – the Resource Renewal Institute, the Center for Biological Diversity, and the Western Watershed Project – sued the National Park Service, alleging ranchers were fouling Tule Elk habitat with pollutants and greenhouse gas emissions. After nearly a decade of litigation, 12 of the 14 agricultural operations agreed to settlement terms to cease operations by April 2026. Those settlements included buyouts of lease agreements, severance packages for more than 100 displaced workers, housing assistance for displaced workers, the newly taken-on cost of maintaining the landscape no longer being cared for or maintained by the ranchers and dairy owners who had previously absorbed those costs, and much more.[26]

Had the environmental groups and agricultural businesses been able to set aside their ideological differences and come to the table to discuss ways in which both sides could benefit and provide a assistance to the Tule Elk without government interference, the story may have been different. If ranches and dairies had remained open, they could have maintained their private enterprises while also developing public-facing educational opportunities within the confines of the park as part of their lease agreements. Each ranch or dairy could have offered insight into how it operated, provided wildlife habitat, maintained soil health, water quality, and more with a 50-50 split of entrance fees going to the operations of the ranch or dairy and the other half being put toward the maintenance and health costs of the overall elk herd. That kind of arrangement would have benefitted the ranches and dairies and the elk herd, which was the stated goal of the environmental groups that sued the National Park Service.

By removing government from the equation, gray and Mexican wolf management in the western United States could also become an unusual but

successful partnership. If ranchers and conservationists were willing to come to the table for discussions revolving around ways to create meaningful change.

Conclusion

With nearly 3,500 wolves scattered across nine of 11 western states, now is the time to determine how best to manage them at both the state and regional levels. Predators throughout the western United States have proven themselves to be resilient, with populations either increasing or remaining stable in nearly every ecosystem in which they reside. A healthy business climate that allows livestock raisers to flourish will help to diminish the ire turned toward gray and Mexican wolves when depredations occur. Creating a healthy business climate for ranchers, ultimately, means better predator management through data sharing and partnerships.

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Pam Lewison is the Research Director for WPC's Center for Agriculture. She is also a fourth-generation farmer raising hay, teff, and other rotational crops and finishes a few beef cattle annually for direct-to-consumer sale. Additionally, she serves as the current Washington CattleWomen's Association president. Her writing and expertise have been featured in ag publications like Capital Press and large news publications like The Seattle Times and The LA Times. She also contributes to the Pacific Research Institute on agricultural issues. Her research has been utilized in numerous hearings in Olympia and she has had the good fortune to work with several lobbyists and legislators on both sides of the aisle. She holds a master's degree in Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communications from Texas A&M University—College Station and a bachelor's degree in English—Creative Writing from Washington State University—Pullman. Her belief in what WPC stands for in the ag space is simple: food does not have a political party; everyone eats.

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