Senate Committee on Natural Resources
900 Court Street NE Salem, Oregon

January 23, 2023

Sub: Testimony in opposition to SB 471 (wolf compensation fund)

Chair Golden, Vice Chair Girod and Members of the Senate Committee on Natural Resources:

This testimony is on behalf of the Oregon Wildlife Coalition (OWC) and the Oregon League of Conservation Voters. OWC consists of the following wildlife conservation groups: Cascadia Wildlands, Center for Biological Diversity, Portland Audubon, Defenders of Wildlife, Humane Society of the United States, Humane Voters Oregon, Oregon Wild, and Western Environmental Law Center. Together we represent over 100,000 Oregonians who care about the state's wildlife and wild spaces.

We urge you to oppose SB 471 and instead ask for reform of the Wolf Management Compensation and Proactive Trust Fund ("Wolf Compensation Fund"). SB 471 would allocate $800,000 of general fund dollars to the Wolf Compensation Fund for the 2023 biennium. The program was established in 2011 to support livestock operators and build tolerance for wolves when they were protected under federal and state Endangered Species Act. The program provides compensation for direct loss (confirmed and probable depredation by wolves), nonlethal tools, and missing livestock, in the listed order of priority. The program receives $100,000 every biennium from the state, and the funds used for nonlethal measures is matched by federal dollars.

We oppose SB 471 for the following reasons:

1. **The program's "missing livestock" component is controversial and unverifiable: missing livestock, by definition, cannot reliably be attributed to wolf depredation**. Livestock can go missing for many reasons including theft, other predators, and illness. There are no sideboards on payments for "missing" livestock — no proof of cattle put out versus brought in and no presence of wolves or known depredation in the area. Payment requests are for the full amount of the livestock. These questionable payments have been investigated by OPB and High Country News. Backfilling the program for this biennium means paying money for claims of missing livestock. In 2021, confirmed and probable wolf depredation and injuries accounted for 50 cattle. In comparison, 679 missing livestock claims have been made for the same period.

2. **The program is not building social tolerance toward wolves.** The premise of the program when it started in 2011 was that by compensating producers for livestock losses, it will make them less motivated to kill wolves, especially when they weren't protected under the state and federal Endangered Species Acts (ESA). However, that is not the situation on-the-ground today. Wolves lost state protections in 2015 and have federal protections only in the western part of the state. Furthermore, the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife issues lethal permits to kill the same wolves that are responsible for a producer's livestock losses. This model is no longer aimed at building social tolerance towards wolves.

3. **The program needs reform**. The Fund was established in 2011 and, to this date, has not been revisited or revised. The structure and provisions of the program made sense when there were wolves in 2-3 counties: county-level structure and payments worked. We now have wolves in 16 counties, and the application and compensation processes make less sense now. Instead, we need a state level livestock loss board to replace the county committees. This will make the process for determinations consistent and more transparent.

Many livestock producers agree that the program is in dire need of reform. Their voices need to be heard as well. Throwing money at a problem will not make it go away. We hope this bill is an opportunity to take a closer look at the program and how it aligns (or does not align) with protecting wolves and promoting coexistence.

Thank you for taking our comments into consideration.

Sincerely,

Sincerely,

Oregon League of Conservation Voters

Members of the Oregon Wildlife Coalition
Cascadia Wildlands
Center for Biological Diversity
Defenders of Wildlife
Humane Society of the United States
Humane Voters Oregon
Oregon Wild
Portland Audubon
Western Environmental Law Center

WOLVES

When cattle go missing in wolf territory, who should pay the price?

A program to reimburse Oregon ranchers for livestock killed by wolves is in trouble.

Gloria Dickie

Image credit: Courtesy of Todd Nash

July 23, 2018 | *From the print edition*

Just before dawn on a chilly day last September, a volunteer range rider left camp in Marr Flat, a ponderosa-pine plain in northeastern Oregon's Wallowa County where ranchers turn 20 cattle on private land each summer. The cows were due down by month's end, and the rider was looking for stragglers. Not 30 minutes later, he found something else — the ribcage of a half-eaten calf, gleaming in the sun.

When Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife biologist Pat Matthews came to investigate, he found a carcass ringed by wolf tracks and covered in bite marks. GPS pinpointed a radio-collared member of the Harl Butte Pack nearby. Roblyn Brown, Oregon's acting wolf coordinator, agreed with Matthews: A wolf had killed the calf.

Armed with this information, Todd Nash, its owner, requested and received $930 from the state — the calf's official value. Oregon, like many states where wolves have made a comeback, has a taxpayer-funded program that compensates ranchers for livestock killed by the predators, offsetting some of the direct costs ranchers bear for their return. In theory, this should also help wolf conservation by encouraging rural areas long at odds with wolves to eventually accept their presence.

Before its adoption in 2011, some believed Oregon's compensation program might be more successful than others in this regard. Oregon's liberal-leaning urban areas expanded support for wolves' re-entry, and legislators had years of data and experience to draw on from other Western states where wolves had returned earlier. The program required ranchers to implement nonlethal wolf deterrents in order to be reimbursed

—something environmental groups like Portland-based Oregon Wild valued. It also gave rural communities more oversight, and recognized the challenges ranchers face in an area [illegible] business by adopting provisions for missing livestock.

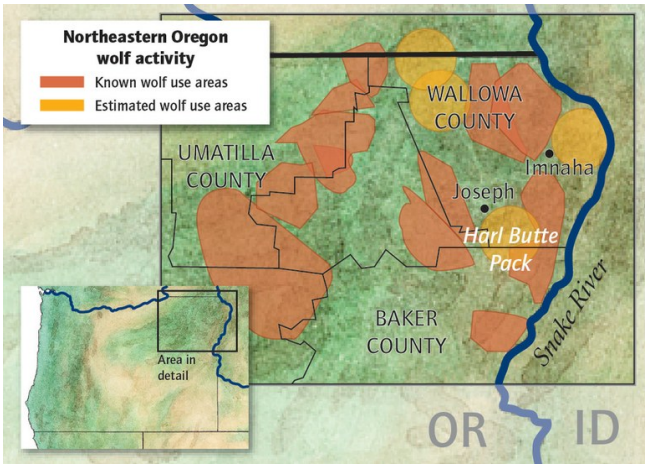
Seven years later, the rate of increase of confirmed livestock kills has remained below the growth rate of the state's wolf population, which increased from 48 in 2012 to 124 by the end of 2017. Brown believes ranchers are implementing best practices for keeping livestock safe. "Producers are learning from other producers," she says.

But signs of trouble have emerged in the first fully participating counties, suggesting potential pitfalls for other counties as they ramp up the program. In Oregon's Wallowa and Baker counties, local oversight of loss claims has proven unbalanced or thin in key cases, leading to approval of suspicious compensation requests. Confirmed wolf kills may not have skyrocketed, but missing cattle claims have, far outpacing them. Between 2012 and 2018, the state paid nearly $177,000 for missing livestock in just three counties, more than double the total amount paid for direct losses in the nine counties that have been eligible for compensation. Critics fear the program's missing-cow allowance is being abused; ranchers counter that the state's official wolf population — and depredation — numbers are too low.

Whatever the reason, such claims have serious implications for both ranchers and wolves. State funding has stayed roughly the same since 2014 — $200,000 every two years, plus a smaller federal grant for preventive measures that the state must match. Increasingly, officials have been forced to cut back on wholly

fulfilling missing cattle claims and funding requests for nonlethal deterrents in hopes of stretching the money.

And despite ev[illegible]g, ranchers don't appear any closer to accepting wolves. This raises questions about whether there are better ways to incentivize coexistence, and it shows just how controversial wolves can be — even when all the pieces seem in place to support their return.



Luna Anna Archey/High Country News Source: Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife

Wolves first returned to Western states on their own, trickling into Glacier National Park from Canada. In 1985, as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service made plans to speed things along by reintroducing 66 gray wolves in Yellowstone National Park and central Idaho, then-National Park Service Director William Mott Jr. reached out to the nonprofit group Defenders of Wildlife. He suggested that a private fund to pay ranchers for livestock losses might help head off tensions. Defenders agreed, and over two decades, as Northern Rockies wolf numbers surpassed 1,600, it paid livestock producers more than $1.3 million. "Having the compensation in place helped get a lot of (ranchers') fears

addressed early on," says Suzanne Stone, who managed the group's compensation program from 1999 until its end.

By 2010, wolves were stable enough that the feds began to withdraw protections and Defenders ended its payouts. Montana, Arizona, New Mexico, Wyoming, Idaho and Washington filled the gap through state programs, with the help of federal grants and seed funds from Defenders.

Not long before, in 2008, wolf pups were born in Oregon's Wallowa Mountains — the first litter in the state in nearly 60 years. Two years later, the state updated its management plan, offering staged protections to wolves as they returned home. But state law barred Oregon's Department of Fish and Wildlife from starting a payout program. As Wallowa's wolf population grew, local rancher Dennis Sheehy began looking for ways to protect cattlemen's interests. Sheehy, a slow talker with bright, crinkly eyes whose life has meandered from Hawaii to Vietnam to a Chinese commune in Inner Mongolia, now runs hundreds of cows in northeastern Oregon, with many grazing up in the Harl Butte area.

The trouble with compensating only for confirmed losses, Sheehy told me over coffee at his ranch house near the town of Wallowa, was that the region's dense forests and rocky canyons were too rugged for ranchers to be able to find all the livestock that wolves may have killed. Paying for missing animals is "about the only way you can have any possibility of accurate compensation out in the Marr Flat, Snake River and Hells Canyon areas," Sheehy said.

The program that Oregon ultimately developed, overseen by the state Department of Agriculture, gave ranchers what Sheehy advocated for. [illegible] on their record-keeping, they [illegible] compensated in full for missing livestock if, after wolves appeared in their area, their losses climbed above their documented historical average.

Under the program, county-level wolf committees would vet claims for missing animals and review investigation reports before applying for state grants to cover claims for confirmed losses based on market value. An additional 30 percent of funding over the county's total annual claimed amount was added to help ranchers pay for deterrents, such as range riders to monitor cows, and fladry, colored flagging that scares wolves away from fence-lines. An Oregon Department of Agriculture official would provide oversight, but authority lay largely with the counties.

Sheehy showed me the creased notebook where he tracks his cows. Other ranchers joke that he has fewer losses because his animals wear Alpine-style cowbells, "like Heidi." So far, he's requested compensation only twice. That's true for many ranchers — though some claims stand out.

Rancher Dennis Sheehy at his Diamond Prairie Ranch in Enterprise, Oregon. Sheehy helped draft the plan the state later adopted for predation compensation in Oregon.

Gloria Dickie

On a blue-sky fall morning, wolf advocate Wally Sykes picked me up in Joseph, Oregon, his wolf-dog hybrid Koda peering from the backseat of his Subaru. Sykes, 72, has a trim white beard and wore a "Wolf Haven" ball cap. We drove into the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest, dodging deer hunters and cows, including two of Sheehy's belled animals, then hiked through thick pine forest to Marr Meadow, not far from where Todd Nash's calf was killed two days earlier. A faint howl drifted through the trees.

Though Sykes has seen wolves in the wild only a half-dozen times, he's devoted a lot of time to them, serving seven years on the Wallowa County Wolf Committee. The program's enabling legislation requires all the committees to include one county commissioner, two livestock producers, two wolf conservation advocates and two county business representatives. But Sykes said Wallowa's committee is biased by local anti-wolf politics,

with the other conservation post historically filled by someone associated with agriculture, not wildlife conservation.

Sykes believes [illegible]ed to questionable decisions. In one case, the Wallowa committee approved a $1,000 compensation request and passed it to Jason Barber, the state official who oversees the program, for a calf killed by a wolf while illegally grazing on an allotment the Forest Service had already closed. The state paid the full amount.

Neighboring Baker County has been unable to fill its wolf-advocate posts, which are currently empty. In 2016, concerns were raised when the committee agreed to compensate for 41 missing calves and 11 missing cows, valued at more than $45,000.

At the time, there had been only one confirmed wolf kill in Baker, in 2012, and, according to the state wildlife department, no pack had yet denned there. That cast doubt on the size of the claim. But the rancher who filed it, Chad DelCurto, said wolves had been active on his allotment for three or four years. Come fall, most of his calves were missing. “I hadn’t had problems in the past, until these wolves started coming in so thick,” DelCurto said.

The committee’s response so alarmed Mike Durgan, one of Baker’s business representatives, that he quit. “Nobody believed (DelCurto’s claim) except our committee,” said Durgan. He worried that it signaled a bigger problem: The county lacked a consistent, defensible procedure for obtaining accurate documentation from ranchers.

Baker County Commissioner Mark Bennett acknowledged the case had problems, but said DelCurto hadn't been using that allotment long enough to have historical loss numbers. When Barber began asking questions, the committee revised its ask, and DelCurto ultimately received $9,540.

Critics believe the case could embolden others. Ranchers can only receive money for missing livestock if their animals are grazing in areas of known wolf activity — currently eight counties — as designated by the state wildlife department. But wolves are fanning out, and more counties will soon be eligible.

Even in more moderate Umatilla County, there are concerns about the limits of oversight. The county's committee has two wolf advocates, and for major claims, it closely investigates ranchers' routines for monitoring cows and locating missing ones, says county commissioner and committee member Larry Givens. But there's only so much vetting they can do. Givens worries wolves are getting blamed for cougar and bear kills, as well as cattle rustling. "I think that you're going to face some risks if you have your animals up in outlying areas."

One subadult and one pup from the Catherine Pack on private property in eastern Union County, May 2017.

Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife

In 2018, compensation requests for missing livestock from four counties climbed to $42,000, far outpacing requests for direct losses, which have remained between $7,000 and $18,000 statewide annually.

Roblyn Brown, the state's wolf coordinator, said that she's not aware of any biological reason for the surge. In theory, places with high missing-cattle claims should more closely track areas that are known to have dense wolf populations or high numbers of confirmed kills.

In a case at Baker County's Pine Valley Ranch, 24 animals disappeared without a trace in fall 2013. The rancher requested more than $26,000. But just one confirmed wolf kill had occurred in the area, a year before. "If the producer is checking his livestock, you would expect the producer, or other people recreating in the area, to find several injured or dead calves to correspond with the missing numbers, if wolves were the cause," said Brown.

The spike isn't good for either rural residents or for wolves. If wolves are solely responsible, then nonlethal preventive measures aren[illegible]ng. That could lead the state [illegible] wolves. To date, the state has paid $595,790 in state and federal funds to 13 counties for nonlethal deterrents. But because the enabling legislation that required these deterrents didn't define what their "reasonable use" would look like, Oregon Wild worries they aren't being deployed effectively. Fladry works in small pastures, but not large allotments. Wallowa County Commissioner Susan Roberts says the only thing that has worked to keep wolves away there is human presence — the county's range rider. But that's just one person for thousands of acres.

Another possibility is that some claims are inflated, either unintentionally or deliberately, blaming wolves for animals that disappeared for other reasons. "Wolves would have to do nothing but kill livestock for 24 hours a day to get up to the numbers they're talking about," said Defenders' Stone. And if ranchers are submitting illegitimate, or poorly documented, claims, they're not just taking money from taxpayers, they may also jeopardize public support for reimbursing ranchers. "That's the kind of thing that's going to kill this program," Durgan said.

Some ranchers have another explanation for the discrepancy between missing cattle claims and confirmed kills: They believe there are more wolves in Oregon than acknowledged, and that the wildlife department is attributing actual wolf kills to other causes. They feel betrayed.

I met rancher Cynthia Warnock at her home in Imnaha,

overlooking rolling hills dotted with Indian paintbrush. She, her husband and brother-in-law have been some of Wallowa's most frequent claimants for confirmed losses, receiving on the order of $4,000.

In late 2016, when wolves killed one of their calves and maimed two others, the Warnocks asked officials to kill the offenders. They had lost more than four animals in the previous six months to wolves — the number legally required for a lethal removal permit. But the state declined, because the season was almost over and the cows would be moved soon.

In another case, Cynthia Warnock found a calf covered in bite marks. But investigators said they weren't wide enough to be from a wolf and more likely came from a coyote. A month later, the Warnocks found a partially eaten cow, but the state ruled that wolves had scavenged an already-dead carcass.

Cynthia didn't trust the findings; like other ranchers, she felt investigators were biased in favor of the wolves the department is charged with protecting. Producers want Wildlife Services, which handles many rancher-wildlife conflicts, often by killing predators, to take over.

Phase three of Oregon's wolf management plan, which eastern Oregon entered in 2017, does allow Wildlife Services to conduct investigations once staff complete required training. That prospect worries Oregon Wild's Rob Klavins. Roughly a quarter of Wildlife Services' budget in Oregon comes from livestock and agricultural producers. "There's an incentive to make a different decision," Klavins said. And with such investigations ultimately

leading not just to a payout, but deciding if wolves will live or die, the stakes are high.

Cynthia Warne[illegible] clear on what she wants. "If we have a pack that predates on livestock, then we eliminate the pack," she said. "Compensation helps us adjust financially, but that's it. ... You can't pay for what we feel."

Dean Tucker, cow boss at the Pine Valley Ranch, left, and rancher Chad DelCurto talk wolves at Tucker's place in Richland, Oregon. In 2016, DelCurto filed a claim for 11 missing cows and 41 missing calves. The state ultimately paid $9,540 of his claim, which had an estimated value of $45,000.

Courtesy of Tony Schick/Oregon Public Broadcasting/EarthFix

Oregon's compensation program doesn't appear any closer to achieving local tolerance for wolves — one of its key goals. If it had, you'd expect to see fewer requests for lethal removal and a decrease in poaching, said Adrian Treves, director of the Carnivore Coexistence Lab at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. In 2017, after eastern Oregon passed a population

threshold where the state's plan begins to relax protections, officials killed five wolves at ranchers' behest — the same number killed — despite far fewer confirmed livestock losses. An additional four wolves may have been poached.

Oregon's troubles raise questions about whether there are better ways to proceed. Some wolf advocates argue that high-conflict areas just aren't appropriate for grazing, and recommend paying ranchers to give up those permits, rather than killing native predators to save nonnative livestock on public land. Others suggest paying ranchers if wolves pass through their private grazing allotments — to reward them for maintaining a healthy ecosystem. That would eliminate the moral hazard posed by programs that depend on hard-to-document, emotionally fraught losses.

Line of descent: How poor management left Mexican wolves dangerously inbred

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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is trying something similar with the Mexican gray wolf in Arizona and New Mexico. In addition to receiving money for confirmed losses, ranchers are paid based on the number of wolves on their private land and public leases, the number of livestock exposed to wolves, and the rancher's efforts to avoid conflicts. But the program has received just a third of its proposed $634,000 budget. "The funding issue is the biggest challenge," said John Oakleaf, the agency's field coordinator for the Mexican Gray Wolf Recovery Project.

Oregon faces a similar financial struggle: The fund for wolf compensation has barely changed since 2014, while the number of wolves in the state has nearly doubled. In 2018, Fish and Wildlife reduce payments on counties' requests for nonlethal controls $271,000 — by more than half. Missing cattle payments, traditionally reduced by 25 percent, were cut to 50 percent. "It's just simple math," Barber says. "We have to do more with less."

Several people are working on possible fixes. Oregon state Sen. Greg Barreto, R, introduced a bill last year that would put more money in the compensation fund based on wolf population increases. And Barber has been working with the county committees to improve claim documentation. One approach might be to have an independent third party verify the number of animals before ranchers let them loose on their range for the season. Chad DelCurto said he did that this year, with the chairman of the Oregon Cattlemen's Association Eastern Oregon Wolf Committee present to help count calves in his corral.

"We've got more eyes and witnesses on," said DelCurto, who has become more hesitant to apply for compensation since the last time. He didn't file any claims for the animals he says went missing in 2017, even though at the end of the year, Oregon confirmed that Baker County had its first pack, the eight-wolf Pine Creek Pack. "It's not just a hearsay deal," DelCurto said. "We have a problem." Less than 48 hours after DelCurto turned out his herds this spring, he said, a turkey hunter spotted wolves among his cows.

Despite using nonlethal deterrents, burying bone piles, and hazing wolves away, DelCurto and another rancher still lost four

calves to the pack this spring. They asked for a lethal control permit. In April, the wildlife department shot and killed three of the Pine Creek

Gloria Dickie is a freelance science and environmental journalist currently reporting from the road.

This story was funded with reader donations to the High Country News Research Fund.

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More from Wolves

Tony Schick, OPB / EarthFix

SCIENCE ENVIRONMENT

Questionable Payments To Oregon Ranchers Who Blame Wolves For Missing Cattle

By Tony Schick (OPB)
Halfway, Oregon July 17, 2017 12 p.m.

Many western states pay livestock operators for cattle and sheep lost to wolves depredation. But an EarthFix investigation found Oregon is making questionable payments to ranchers.

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Chad DelCurto parked his pickup beside the road winding the Snake River canyon, surveying the jagged green edge of Oregon where his cattle grazed. This is where he lost them.

There's ample feed and room to wander on these remote and rugged stretches of public land. But there's added risk to open range: harsh weather, disease, rustlers, predators.

"This is the reality — this is outside, all natural, grass-fattened beef," he said.

DelCurto dresses in denim from neck to ankle, with mud-splattered black on his boots and hat. He's been ranching all his life, and he's teaching his 9-year-old son to do the same.

Last year, DelCurto claimed he lost 41 calves and 11 cows out here in Baker County. Each calf could be worth over $700, the cows almost twice that.

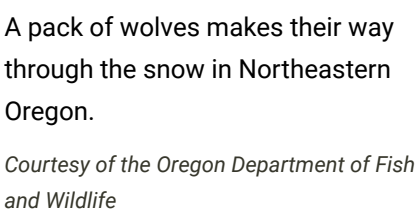
He blames wolves. Alerts from state wildlife officials showed them in the area. He said the landscape showed some scat and tracks. And he could sense it in his cattle.

"You got up in there and tried to move them, could tell they'd been spooked," DelCurto said. "I can't prove it because there's no carcasses, but I know damn good and well the wolves had a big part in it."

So DelCurto filed for state-funded compensation for the losses, just as he did for nine missing cattle the year before.

But here's the issue: There hasn't been a confirmed wolf kill of livestock in Baker County since 2012. And according to state biologists, there are only three known resident wolves in the county. Given that, a wolf-related loss of that size, with no carcass to show, would be unheard of.

Despite all that, the Baker County wolf compensation board approved DelCurto's claim. That left one state official with the dilemma of whether to deny the rancher compensation or approve a loosely documented claim so large it would have decimated the state program's budget.



A pack of wolves makes their way through the snow in Northeastern Oregon.

Courtesy of the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife

Ever since wolves' return in the West, states have experimented with some form of compensation for ranchers, with mixed results.

Since 2012, Oregon has kicked in money for ranchers to hire range riders and purchase radios and fence lining, called fladry, to deter wolves. The state has also compensated livestock operators for both confirmed or unconfirmed losses of cattle, sheep or working dogs. It's a well-regarded program that provides some relief for ranchers feeling the added strain of a returned predator: even some of the wolf-advocate groups who clash with ranchers say it was necessary.

But an EarthFix examination found the state has made a questionable pattern of payments that contradicts established knowledge of the state's wolf population.

The investigation also found state and county officials do not take all the necessary steps to confirm claims of missing livestock and ensure a limited money pool flows toward legitimate claims of wolf kills. That can mean less money to prevent wolf conflicts, and less money for documented losses.

With no consistent system for verifying unfound livestock losses, the state has little way of knowing for sure whether it's denying some ranchers their due compensation or paying out claims it shouldn't.

No biological explanation

Chart the payments year over year, and a pattern emerges.

Since 2012, payments for missing cattle have increased when actual confirmed losses did not. Experts say those rates should track together.

"There is no possible biological or ecological explanation for this," said Luigi Boitani, an international expert on wolves who reviewed the data. In 2010, the University of Rome professor uncovered problems with wolf compensation in his home country of Italy.

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"Small variations are understandable but the huge variation in the last few years has no justification," Boitani said. "The rate of confirmed deaths and missing livestock should track together."

Roblyn Brown, acting wolf coordinator for the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, had a similar assessment: "I don't know of a biological explanation for why claims for missing livestock have gone up."

Others, like the Oregon Department of Agriculture, which administers the compensation program, say the change could be attributed to awareness: more and more ranchers discovering and utilizing these compensation programs.

Map the payments and another pattern emerges that confounds wolf biologists.

Since 2012 the state of Oregon has paid a total of over $150,000 to compensate ranchers for over 380 missing cattle and sheep. All of it has gone to three Northeast

Umatilla and Wallowa have large known wolf populations, and a history of confirmed depredations. Baker County has little of either, yet ranchers there have received more money than anywhere else in the state, at $65,000.

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"We would expect wolf-caused missing livestock to be more likely in areas where we have seen confirmed depredations, and have high wolf density," Brown said.

In total, payments for livestock losses in Eastern Oregon have far surpassed what state officials had projected based on data from other states.

The government might not believe DelCurto's numbers, but he doesn't believe the government's either.

Needle in a haystack

He searched by horseback, trudging up ridges of snow. He searched by helicopter. Still, he couldn't find his missing cattle.

"A foot of snow and you're not cutting any tracks," DelCurto said. "At that point, you start counting up and cutting your losses."

He turned out about 350 head of cattle, including pregnant cows to give birth on the open range. DelCurto has done it many times. Usually, he said, more of them come back.

"That just doesn't happen," he said. "You don't go to grass and have them die."

Fellow ranchers near Halfway reported a combined 21 livestock missing that year they say were wolf-related.

There's a reason ranchers expect to be compensated for losses, even without proof wolves are to blame: You try finding a cow carcass in 10,000 acres of wilderness.

"It's just damn rugged and steep. Trying to find a corpse or something like that is like trying to find a needle in a haystack," DelCurto said.

If you could take the flight DelCurto did, you would see what he means.

It is not the open pasture you might picture for cattle ranching. An hour soaring over Northeast Baker County reveals miles of dense timber and canyons.

But even discovering the remains of a cow thought to have been preyed upon by wolves doesn't always mean much to cattlemen. Some no longer bother to report wolf kills to ODFW, they say, because they are unsatisfied with the response. Ranchers in Eastern Oregon have complained to the state that dead livestock investigations are too slow and

"We're losing it. You've lost a lot of it," Todd Nash of the Oregon Cattlemen's Association told ODFW commissioners at a meeting in May. "Most of these aren't called in in Wallowa County anymore. You have to backtrack into talking ranchers into participating again."

There are at least 112 wolves statewide, mostly scattered across Wallowa, Umatilla and Union counties further north. There's also a population further southwest, in the Klamath area.

The state's best data show three wolves known to be residing in Baker County.

DelCurto disagrees. So does his neighbor, Dean Tucker, the cow boss at Pine Valley Ranch in Halfway.

"When the Department of (Fish and) Wildlife tells the public there's only X number of wolves running around, they're full of s***," Tucker said.

Last year, Pine Valley Ranch reported five cattle missing because of wolves. The year before, it was seven.

"There's a hell of a lot more wolves than what they tell us," Tucker said.

Dean Tucker, cow boss at the Pine Valley Ranch, left, and rancher Chad DelCurto talk wolves at Tucker's place in Richland, Oregon.

Tony Schick, OPB / EarthFix

Brian Ratliff, the local ODFW biologist, said the state's wolf population likely is higher than the official minimum estimates, but not by much. And there are wolves, like the Snake River Pack, for which the agency can only make educated guesses of their whereabouts.

He said his agency is almost surely under-counting the number of cattle and sheep killed by wolves, too, though he can't say by how many.

"You could not find 100 percent of livestock depredations. You could not do it," Ratliff said, referring to the forested landscapes where DelCurto and Tucker turn out cattle. "It's too broken, it's too rough."

In 2003, a research team from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service tackled the question of how many are missed. That often-cited study estimated for every livestock carcass you find killed by a wolf in rough country like this, there are seven more out there you don't find.

Baker County's payments fly in the face of that. For one proven depredation there, ranchers have been compensated for 85 missing cattle.

Other counties have much lower rates. In Umatilla County, the rate is just over one in seven. In Wallowa County, more cattle were confirmed dead from wolves than were claimed missing.

Cattle poke their heads through the fence at Kelly Birkmaier's property east of Enterprise, Ore.

The case for compensation

Most Western states have some form of wolf compensation, an attempt to help ranchers with the added costs and stress from a predator they didn't want and felt was forced on them by people who don't bear the burden.

But payments for dead livestock don't cut it, many say.

Kelly Birkmaier, who ranches in Oregon's Wallowa County, said wolves have killed her cattle, injured them, spooked them and caused them to run through fences. The cost of all that adds up.

Harassment from wolves stresses cattle in ways that can reduce their weight gain or pregnancy rates, according to ranchers and others in the livestock industry. Beyond that, wolves can render cattle dogs useless, because cattle begin to associate them with wolves.

"Is this something we can keep doing? At this point in time, yes, it seems to still be working. But the added hardship and the added labor from the wolves make it challenging," Birkmaier said.

Ranchers take pride in their cattle, she said, and when something out of their control threatens that, "it is very hard, mentally, on you."

For many years, the pro-wolf group Defenders of Wildlife compensated ranchers for losses as an attempt to increase tolerance for the predators, said Suzanne Stone, the organization's Northwest representative. As wolves became more established, they stopped and states began creating their own, she said.

Kelly Birkmaier, Wallowa County rancher, at her property outside Enterprise, Oregon.

Tony Schick, OPB/EarthFix

Idaho no longer compensates for missing livestock anymore, only for government-confirmed losses. When Idaho did compensate for missing livestock several years ago, its program was plagued by complaints about fraudulent claims.

"They would give compensation to their friends, sometimes they would compensate themselves," said Stone, who is based in Boise, Idaho. "It was very loosely run. It would

run out of money super quick, and people were only compensated for pennies on the dollar."

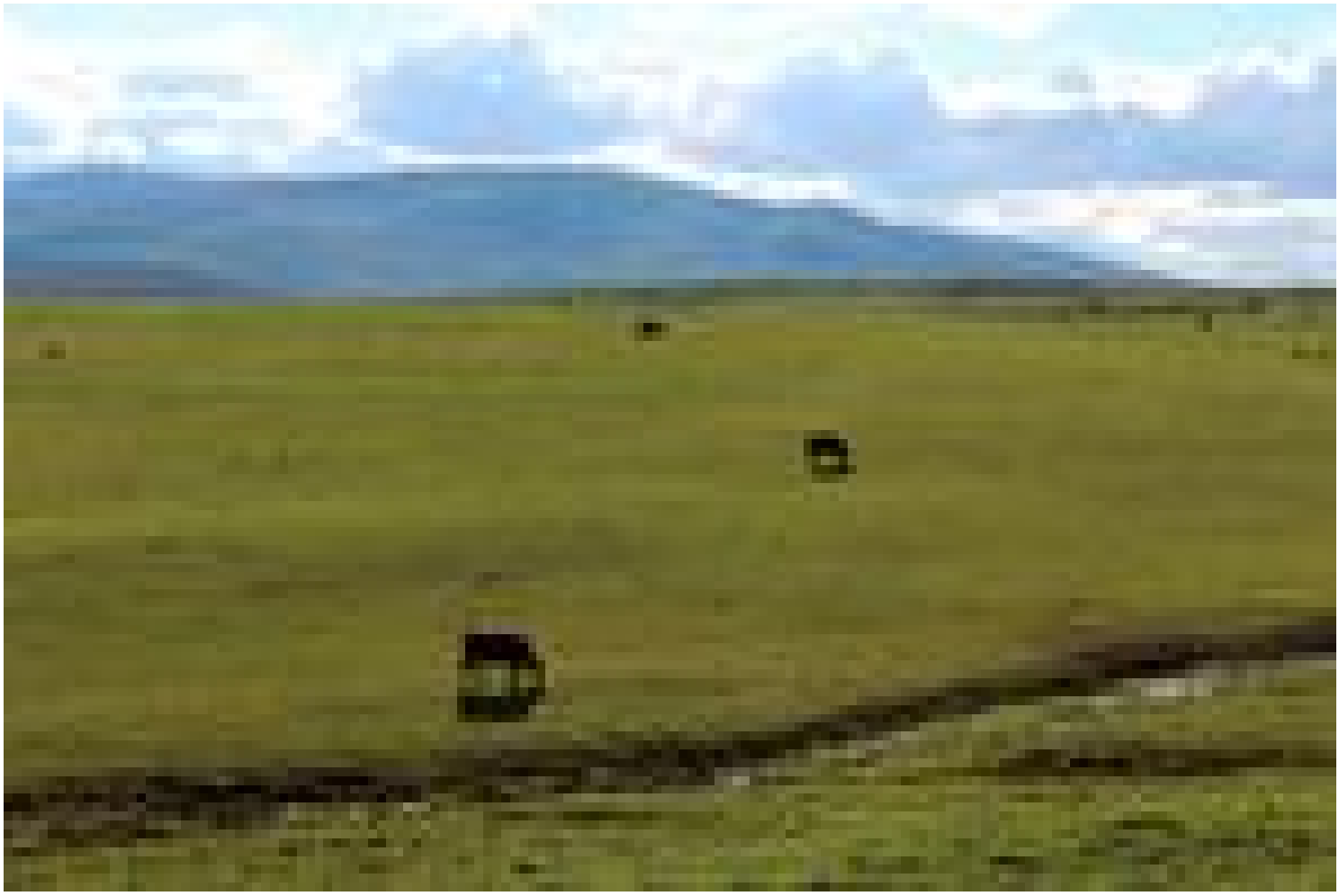
Wyoming pays for missing cattle, but only if there's also a confirmed kill. Using the ratio in the Fish and Wildlife study, Wyoming compensates for up to 7 missing cattle for each confirmed loss.

Washington recently began paying for indirect wolf losses, including missing animals, weight loss and reduced pregnancy rates. So far only two ranchers have used it since 2015. Its process is long and involved — each file for a livestock producer's claim is over 50 pages of documentation. In Oregon, sometime's it's only two or three pages.

In Oregon, ranchers submit their claims through county boards, made up of county commissioners, ranchers, business members and wolf advocates.

When Oregon established its local-focused program, Stone said it had the potential to become the best in the country. The plan was to try it for a year or two, she said, and then re-evaluate to see if the right people are being compensated.

"I don't think that the program's been evaluated, at all," she said. "And that really is an important step, so that you can make sure that it's transparent, honest and sustainable."



Cattle graze in a pasture in Baker County, Oregon.
Tony Schick, OPB / EarthFix

Questions over large claim

Last year, the claim from Baker County was so large it raised questions at the Department of Agriculture.

Mike Durgan sat on Baker County's compensation board at the time, when it approved a request of payment for 73 missing animals — 52 of which were DelCurto's. Durgan quit, fed up with the county's lack of due diligence.

"Baker County's was not believable," he said. "It was baffling to me how we let that slide by."

He said unverified claims discredit a good program for honest ranchers.

"Some of the most anger I got was from other ranchers," he said. "They realize

After the state started raising questions, Durgan said the board simply asked for less money, rather than trying to find the right number. Ultimately, Baker County received a total $16,125, still more than any other county. That included paying DelCurto for 12 missing cattle.

“I will say that the committee here, we started off with some missteps,” said Mark Bennett, a Baker County commissioner and rancher who sits on the compensation board.

Bennett said the county didn’t want to set a bar so high no rancher could clear it.

“We didn’t have a clear picture for our producers, what all was required,” Bennett said. “Some of them could come up with some really decent documentation, and some it was weak.”

Lapses in oversight

Across Oregon these requests are supposed to document ranchers used techniques to prevent wolf damage. They’re supposed to document that all other potential factors for the loss besides wolves have been ruled out.

State and county records show some do not, and the amount of evidence varies widely from claim to claim. Counties and ranchers are under no obligation to consult with ODFW, the state’s authority on wolf populations, about missing livestock.

Missing livestock compensation requests also rely extensively on documents detailing cattle counts at the start and end of grazing season, as well as estimates of historical losses. But the state has no standard for what evidence suffices, meaning not all ranchers are held to the same standard.

Claims that sailed through the process left one worker at the Department of Agriculture, Jason Barber, doing the job meant for several county compensation boards. In the past two years, Barber has raised questions about claims in Umatilla, Wallowa and Baker counties that were submitted without supporting documentation.

The result is a system with spotty evidence and large gray areas, meaning legitimate claims could be denied and questionable ones could be paid.

In one case, the state paid nearly $1,500 for a confirmed wolf kill, only to realize it wasn’t one more than a year later. The county was allowed to simply move the funds to

Last year, the state approved Wallowa County's grant application despite the fact that its compensation board never met to approve the request. Under deadline, a county commissioner sent the application to ODA without going through the process required by statute.

Barber, director of Internal Services and Consumer Protection at the Department of Agriculture, said the agency is working to improve the program and plans to create a checklist that counties can use "to make sure everything is kosher as far as what's in statute, what's in rule."

The state also has been unable to prove that ranchers are using the wolf-deterrent materials it's paid for ranchers to use, including fladry fence lining and radio boxes. The Agriculture Department didn't collect some counties' annual reports until EarthFix filed a public records request for them.

State-purchased fladry often sits in storage, as locals officials and ranchers say it is ineffective in the most problematic areas for wolf conflict.

To deter wolves, Baker County used the money to hire a range rider whom ranchers said they never saw. That left officials considering new ways to verify his time spent on the range.

Verifying the proper use of these funds has gained importance as wolves spread and more counties draw from the same pool of money — just over $210,000 this year. Already, the state has too little money to fund the requests it gets.

Based on trust

Wallowa County rancher Dennis Sheehy at the Diamond Prairie Ranch near Enterprise, Oregon. Sheehy and a fellow rancher devised the first draft of Oregon's compensation plan back in 2010.

Tony Schick, OPB/EarthFix

Dennis Sheehy saw this coming. The longtime rancher is the father of Oregon's compensation plan.

As the sun set over Wallowa County, the cows mooed and cold air crept in over the Diamond Prairie Ranch. Sheehy was just finishing a long day of branding, and was facing another one in the morning.

"All of this was thought about when we put it together," said Sheehy, who devised the first draft of the compensation plan with a fellow rancher in 2010. It was adopted by the Legislature a year later.

"What it's based on is trust within the livestock industry here," he said. "There may be some people that do or do not have the same set of integrity and honor, you might say, about that."

"That might be a little extreme, but then another guy that I really do trust, they lost 16 or 17," he said.

Wolves are not the biggest threat, Sheehy said. At least to his ranch, they're just another problem that takes incremental bites into his operation's bottom line, along with drought, weather and cattle prices.

A few years ago, prices spiked and Oregon's cattle industry surpassed $900 million in total value, making it the state's top agricultural industry. Prices have fallen since.

"You're going to see people going out of business," he said, if prices stay low, and predators are just one more thing to tip the scale.

"Low prices, you get the wolves eating on you, lose two or three calves, it could be a little more serious," he said.

Sheehy said compensation has done its job: Lessen the blow to ranchers. But wolf territory is expanding in Oregon, and Sheehy doubts state leaders would fund a statewide compensation program.

He now wonders what will become of what he started.

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