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Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Wildfire
900 Court St. NE
Salem, Oregon 97301

February 13, 2025

Re: SB 777 (Relating to the depredation of livestock)

Chair Golden, Vice Chair Nash, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Colin Reynolds. I am the Senior Advisor to the Northwest Program at Defenders of Wildlife (“Defenders”). Defenders is a national conservation organization dedicated to the protection of all native animals and plants in their natural communities, with over 40,000 members and supporters in Oregon. On behalf of Defenders, I am submitting the following comments in opposition to SB 777 and amendment -1 (5x multiplier and 50% minimum for nonlethal financial assistance. This bill and amendment -1 would modify Oregon’s existing Wolf Depredation Compensation Program (“Program”) by:

- 1) Applying a multiplier of 5x the fair market value for the amount compensated for the loss or injury of cows, sheep and goats.
- 2) Raising the minimum percentage of grant program funds distributed for financial assistance from 30% to 50%.
- 3) Establishing a new ceiling of compensation of \$25,000 per livestock animal or working dog.

As an organization, we are very invested in the recovery of Oregon’s wolves and believe recovery will only occur while working with our state and federal agency partners and members of the community who live and work alongside wolves. As an organization, we also recognize compensation plays a crucial role – alongside proactive conflict prevention tools – as part of Oregon’s integrated approach to addressing livestock losses caused by wolves. Together, our goal should be to ensure those living alongside wolves have all the resources and support they need to reduce conflict. This approach is essential for the long-term, sustainable recovery of wolf populations.

Defenders is very invested in the success of the Program and my colleagues and I have invested significant amounts of time, energy and resources to make that a reality.

Specifically:

- In 1987, Defenders established a wolf-livestock conflict compensation fund in western states to support producers before states developed their own compensation programs.

- In 2011, Defenders was one of the stakeholder groups that developed the legislation which established a state-level compensation program in Oregon.
- In 2020, Defenders identified problems with the current Program and collaborated with eastern Oregon producers to propose solutions that would streamline the process, address the issues of transparency and accountability, and ensure the Program was useful to producers (e.g., expedited direct loss payments).
- In 2020, Defenders developed a proposal that was shared with the Oregon Department of Agriculture (“ODA”), the Governor’s office and county-level stakeholders on ways to reform the Program and participated in an ODA hosted a multi-stakeholder meeting to continue those discussions.
- In 2024, Defenders participated in a legislator-led Working Group to develop ideas for updating the Program.

Simply put, we have a history and motivation to support an efficient and functioning compensation program in the state.

Defenders recognizes the challenge Oregon has in reforming the Program to meet the needs of livestock producers while ensuring it is a complement to wolf recovery. However, we oppose SB 777 and amendment -1, as currently written, for the following reasons:

In a time of limited finances, the 5x multiplier and the new \$25,000 ceiling of compensation per depredation claim endanger the fiscal stability of the Compensation Program. In 2023, the Oregon Department of Agriculture distributed approximately \$475,000 to counties, with approximately \$70,000 to loss compensation and about \$400,000 to prevention. A 5x multiplier, applied to even a small portion of the losses, would significantly increase the amount of funds distributed by the Program going to compensation. That would either require a commensurate reduction in funds going to prevention or a dramatic increase in the amount of funding needed to support the Program.

It is impossible to overstate the importance of non-lethal tools and the dedicated funding that supports proactive conflict prevention through the Program. Across other states with wolves, proven strategies such as range riding, fencing, and attractant removal remain essential for reducing conflict. In a time of difficult and uncertain financial circumstances, this is surely not the moment to make an unnecessary change to a Program and endanger its financial stability. Maintaining strong, consistent funding ensures that livestock producers have the resources they need to minimize losses before they occur—an approach critical to both successful wolf recovery and thriving rural communities.

The 5x multiplier does not “fix” any problems with the Compensation Program. Several issues with the Compensation Program have surfaced, and this bill does not address those issues. For example, there are inefficiencies in the Program, and it can take up to a year for compensation claims to be paid. Other states, such as Montana, have a State Livestock Board that can standardize and pay claims expeditiously. Some Oregon counties are

challenged to set up compensation committees, even though there are depredations in the county.

A better course of action is to resume the paused 2024 Compensation Working Group.

After last year's multiplier bill failed to pass, several legislators created an ad hoc working group comprised of conservationists and livestock producers. That working group failed to proceed to the phase where both elements engaged in substantive discussions on an agreed-upon solution. Defenders believes a compromise solution is possible and is looking forward to restarting that conversation.

Defenders is committed to participating and collaborating in any effort that would reform the Program and believes the working group discussions ended prematurely. We strongly recommend the Committee oppose SB 777 and amendment -1 as currently written and move this discussion to a work group where we will have more time to discuss ways to improve the Program and ensure its long-term viability.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this important issue.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'C Reynolds', written in a cursive style.

Colin Reynolds
Senior Advisor, Northwest Program
Defenders of Wildlife