

Newly Obtained Documents Reveal Washington Fish & Wildlife Side-Stepped Non-Lethal Actions Before Wiping Out Wolf Packs

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A new tranche of newly disclosed documents reveals rot at the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (the Department) and reckless oversight and killing of the state's endangered wolves.

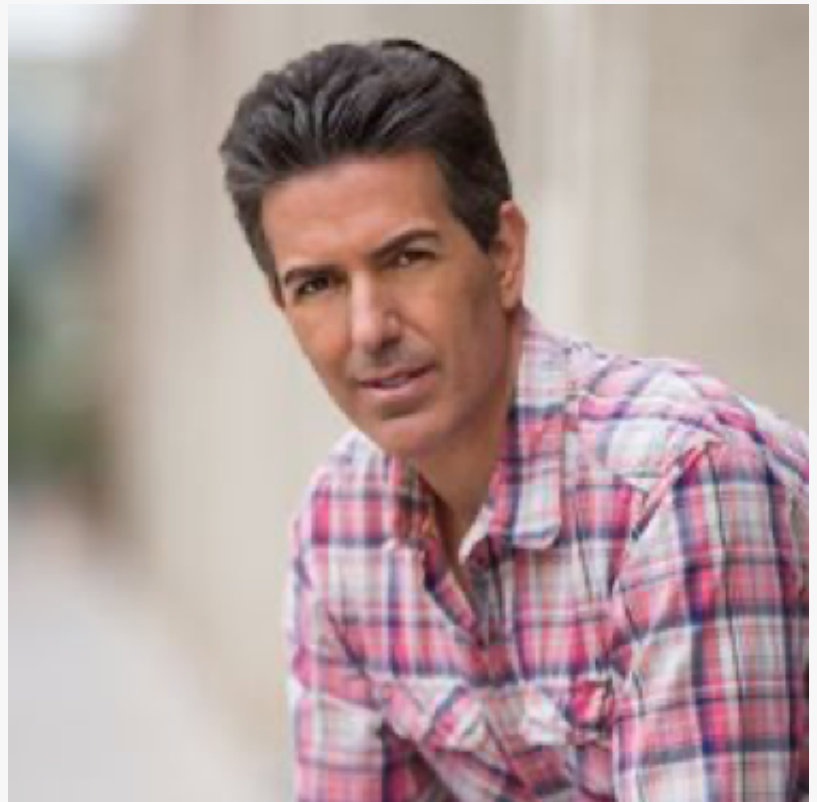
According to documents submitted in a King County court case – which just came to light on January 9th – the Department contracted with cattle ranchers Arron and Jolene Scotten for field work in 2018 to deter wolves from harassing cattle in eastern Washington. Their task was to ride horses or ATVs, monitor movements of wolves and cattle, and try to keep them apart. It's known as "range riding," and it's one of a series of non-lethal management strategies designed to tamp down ranchers' anxiety about wolves and to keep both wolves and cattle alive.

The court documents allege that the ranchers lied about their paid range riding work. When they were supposed to be in the field, documents allege they were at a high-end Spokane hotel, far from the landscape they were paid to patrol.

If the theft charges against the Scottens turn out to be true, the Department wouldn't be the first government agency scammed by contractors. But this fraud is just part of a pattern of false claims and merciless actions by the Department and some of its team members and partners.



Wolves on the open range



Wayne Pacelle

In 2018 and 2019, the Department came under sustained criticism, including from AWA and the Center for a Humane Economy (the Center), for killing dozens of endangered wolves for ranchers. The Center charged that the one well-known ranching family, the McIrvins, were intentionally placing cattle near wolves in order to trigger lethal control actions by the Department. In so many cases this “live baiting” worked: Wolves killed some cattle, and then the state killed the wolves in retaliation.

The Department claimed it had done everything it could, in the form of range riding and other non-lethal strategies, prior to taking the painful step of killing wolves. The Department and its staff asserted that their vigorous and valiant non-lethal management efforts just weren't enough. They had to kill the wolves so the ranchers wouldn't take matters into their own hands and resort to their old way of dealing with wolves – “shoot, shovel and shut up.”

The narrative was overstated at best. A sham at worst.

The Department has been trading on the goodwill of the Wolf Advisory Group (WAG) – a citizens' advisory group consisting of diverse stakeholders including animal protection groups – as additional cover for their decisions to kill wolves. Some WAG members, prompted by their allies in the agency, reiterated the Department's false framing that killing wolves is regrettable but necessary since all non-lethal strategies have been exhausted.

Last fall, not long after the Department killed off all members of the Old Profanity Territory pack living mainly in the Colville National Forest, Washington Governor Jay Inslee pointedly told the Department to change its ways. “I write to ask you to make changes in the gray wolf recovery program to further increase reliance on non-lethal methods and to significantly reduce the need for lethal removal of this species,” Inslee wrote in a letter to Department Director Kelly Susewind.

These latest documents held back by the Department for months reveal Governor Inslee was correct in his assessment of the Department, as were the broader set of critics who believed the Department's “commitment” to trying all non-lethal management practices was overstated.

The Department needs an overhaul. The Fish and Wildlife Commission, which hires and fires the Director, needs to assert its authority and rein in its staff leadership. The Department's assault on endangered wolves and its subversion of a citizen-approved ballot measure to protect black bears and cougars has been reckless in some cases and illegal in others.

These latest details only add to the narrative of the Department's negligence and poor oversight over wolves.

Let's remember what transpired just six months ago.

The Center for a Humane Economy, working with two citizens serving as plaintiffs, helped initiate a legal action to block the Department from killing the remaining wolves from the Old Profanity Territory pack. The hearing seeking to stay further killing of wolves was set for 10 a.m. on Friday morning, August 16th.

Just after dawn but before the mid-morning courtroom proceeding, Department personnel said they killed all surviving pack members. The Department shot four family members from helicopters and on the ground, using the radio collars previously placed on the wolves to track their movements. All this killing occurred just minutes or hours before the court proceeding, when the judge would find the Department had not made the case for lethal removal and must stop the shooting.

This was another, if extreme, pandering maneuver by the Department to satisfy the whims of the McIrvins, who'd publicly stated they wanted wolves out of Washington. Their ranching

operation, the Diamond M Ranch, has been responsible for complaints triggering 85 percent of wolves killed through depredation permits since wolves returned to the state a decade ago.

Taking a birds' eye view of the situation, it's clear the Department's personnel became contract killers for a small number of ranchers who never accepted that wolves have a rightful place in Washington. These ranchers often grazed cattle at subsidized rates on national forests – on land generally considered marginal for grazing but ideal habitat for wolves and other predators. And according to the documents just made available to the public, the Department even paid the ranchers themselves to conduct phantom non-lethal ranger-rider programs.

Governor Inslee took a major step to rein in the Department with his October letter. But that letter was just the first step in reorienting the work of the wildlife agency.

The Department is allowing bear baiting and hounding on timber company lands in violation of a citizen initiative that banned the practices. It is allowing mass killing of cougars, and it is not stepping in as rural counties initiate their own cougar control programs. And its program toward wolves has been scripted by the state's most extreme ranchers.

It's time for the Government to appoint Commissioners who will hire a Department Director who recognizes that native predators should be protected and that the agency needs to attract people with the skills and resolve to actually implement successful non-lethal management programs in the field.

The Department's talk has been cheap. What speaks volumes is the growing body count of wolves, bears, and cougars. Wild creatures killed for no good reason. Washington voters want a new approach. No more false promises and phantom programs.

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