

1 **DRAFT COMMISSION POSITION STATEMENT: Wolves in Washington**

2 **Draft Version: April 2, 2012**

3 **Background and Context**

4 The purpose of this position statement is to provide some background context for Washington  
5 Fish and Wildlife Commission (Commission) guidelines and objectives relative to management  
6 of wolves in Washington. The purpose is to establish strategic direction for the Washington  
7 Department of Fish and Wildlife (Department) as it works to implement the recently adopted  
8 Wolf Conservation and Management Plan (Wolf Recovery Plan).

9 This position statement defines guidelines and objectives for executing the Department's  
10 responsibilities and guiding the development of a post-delisting management plan. It also  
11 identifies unresolved issues of concern to the Commission

12 Nothing in this position statement is intended to conflict with the Wolf Conservation and  
13 Management Plan for Washington, adopted on December 3, 2011.

14 **The Future of Wolves in Washington**

15 Following re-introduction releases in Yellowstone National Park and Idaho within the Northern  
16 Rocky Mountain Distinct Population Segment (DPS) in the early 1990s, wolf populations  
17 expanded rapidly, demonstrating the species' resilience and adaptability. Wolf populations  
18 continue to grow throughout the West. Natural wolf re-colonization is now occurring in  
19 Washington.

20 Experts disagree on the question of how well wolves will fare in Washington. With the smallest  
21 land base, the second highest human population among the western states, large gaps between  
22 expanses of suitable habitat, and a smaller prey base, wolf populations may not expand as  
23 quickly in Washington as they have in the Rocky Mountain States. Conversely, wolves are  
24 resilient and adaptable animals with high fecundity and population growth potential and they  
25 may expand exceedingly well.

26 There are many unanswered questions about wolves in Washington and how we should best  
27 accommodate this new addition to the landscape. It is vital that we accurately monitor their  
28 progress, understand their impacts, and carefully track wolf populations in our State.

29 With this in mind, the Department must respond to the "reality" on the ground no matter what  
30 happens here. Regardless of the rate of recovery, wolf population monitoring and responding

31 rapidly to incidents of human conflict, unacceptable impacts on ungulates, and livestock  
32 depredations are high priorities for the Commission and the Department.

### 33 **Long-term Management of Wolves in Washington**

#### 34 Priority Assigned this Management Challenge

35 This position statement establishes guidelines and principles for the implementation of the  
36 Department's responsibilities during the downlisting, delisting and post-delisting stages of wolf  
37 management. To succeed, both the Commission and the Department must engage in active,  
38 assertive, and responsive management of wolves.

39 Years of budget cuts have left the Department with fewer available resources, so the challenges  
40 of managing wolves arrive at a difficult time. But in light of the overriding importance of  
41 actively managing wolf recovery, sufficient support must be dedicated to wolf management  
42 activities, including: population monitoring; research; response to reports and conflicts;  
43 management of ungulates; outreach and education; and law enforcement.

44 The Director and the Commission will communicate frequently to ensure timely and accurate  
45 review of Department actions to manage wolf populations through the delisting process and  
46 beyond.

#### 47 Plan Secures Recovery

48 The Wolf Recovery Plan passed by the Commission in December 2011 satisfies delisting criteria  
49 incorporated in WAC 232-12-297. It establishes recovery objectives for down listing and  
50 delisting of the species and relies on the best available science.

51 Population persistence analyses conducted by the Department indicated that the recovery  
52 objectives in the Plan should assure Washington's wolf populations will become healthy,  
53 genetically diverse, and persistent.

#### 54 Social Tolerance must be Secured

55 While the biological foundation of the Plan is critical to its success, so also is social tolerance.  
56 Rural communities located in "wolf country" have higher levels of anxiety about wolf recovery  
57 than do those who live outside wolf habitat. They fear dramatic changes in their way of life,  
58 their livelihoods, and their sense of security. Without effective management of wolf impacts,  
59 social tolerance in rural areas will decline, respect for the law and the Department may suffer,  
60 and wolves may be killed illegally.

61 A major focus by the Department must be on building and maintaining positive and effective  
62 working relationships with rural communities, livestock producers, hunters, and other  
63 stakeholders. Positive relationships will not be possible unless the Department communicates  
64 regularly with local producers to inform them about nearby wolf populations. Through regular  
65 contact with stakeholders and a commitment to respond to their concerns, the Department can  
66 build credibility for the program and public respect for the law.

#### 67 Support Recovery and Ongoing Management

68 Recovery of wolf populations in our state, as in many states in the U.S. Midwest and Rocky  
69 Mountain regions, has triggered a contentious political debate. Few other delisting processes  
70 have generated such strongly divided attitudes. As with most complicated natural resource  
71 management issues, decisions cannot be made solely on the basis of over-simplified opinion  
72 polls. Still, the views and opinions of the people matter.

73 In a 2009 survey of Washington State residents, Colorado State University found broad public  
74 acceptance (74.5%) for natural wolf re-colonization. Many residents respect wolves for their  
75 cultural value, intelligence, hunting ability, devotion to other pack members, and ecological role.  
76 Public testimony indicated that tourism aimed at seeing or hearing wolves in the wild will be of  
77 interest to numerous citizens and may generate economic benefits. The public expects the  
78 Department to be responsive to their viewpoints and to promote positive wolf-related  
79 interactions and wolf-related benefits such as the opportunity to personally observe, photograph  
80 or study wolves in the wild.

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81 The survey also found that 69.8% accepted limits on wolves if they cause declines in deer and  
82 elk; 65.7% accepted lethal removal of wolves if they are causing loss of livestock; and 63.5%  
83 accepted hunting of wolves once they have reached recovery levels. In Washington, support is  
84 broad for both wolf recovery and for active management of wolves and their impacts.

#### 85 Wolves are Not Like Other Listed Species

86 Wolves are not like other listed species in Washington. In most cases, listed species have  
87 declined due to habitat loss or excess exploitation. In contrast, by the 1930s, wolves were  
88 intentionally extirpated to reduce their impacts to livestock. Unlike many other listed species  
89 that may require habitat protections in addition to "take" restrictions, wolves are resilient and  
90 prolific generalists that can thrive in many suitable habitat types, assuming sufficient prey, and  
91 social tolerance. No other listed species presents the potential for direct and significant  
92 predation on livestock and ungulate populations that wolves do. Few other listed species cause  
93 concerns for public safety. Because of these differences, intentional translocation of wolves is  
94 more controversial and socially divisive than natural recolonization. Use of translocation into  
95 areas without wolves as a means to accelerate dispersal will only be used consistent with  
96 provisions of state and federal laws and regulations. Included among those requirements are

97 [those pertaining to adequate notice and opportunities for comment by affected communities.](#)  
98 [The Department will convey to the relevant federal agencies our interest in notification prior to](#)  
99 [federal decisions to move wolves from one area of federal land within our state to other areas](#)  
100 [under federal ownership within our state.](#)

101 *Impacts on Ungulates*

102 As wolves increase in number, their impacts on prey populations will also grow in certain areas.  
103 Where prey species were overabundant as was the case in Yellowstone National Park, the  
104 presence of wolves has been beneficial to vegetation and other species. Where prey  
105 populations are less abundant, the impact of wolves on ecosystem health may not be so clear.

106 Of Washington's 10 elk herds, three are meeting population objectives, three are below their  
107 population objectives, and two do not have set objectives as yet. Only two herds currently  
108 exceed objectives. Hunting opportunity has long been closely regulated to achieve herd  
109 objectives.

110 The Commission recognizes the importance of the hunting tradition. The North American  
111 Model of Wildlife Conservation founded in the 1800s has provided a durable approach to  
112 securing adequate funding for wildlife management and conservation. Under this model,  
113 hunting license sales provide revenues for management and hunters supply a low cost and  
114 efficient means to limit wildlife populations. The Commission is concerned with potential  
115 future impacts of wolves on ungulate populations (deer, elk and moose), resulting impacts on  
116 hunting opportunity, and the continued viability of the North American Model in our state.

117 The Commission has directed the Department to actively engage in wolf management. This  
118 should include: monitoring of wolf re-colonization rates, population size, pack/breeding pair  
119 locations, rapid responses to wolf problems, research, monitoring wolf impacts on ungulate  
120 population abundance and demographics. Actions to maintain or improve ungulate  
121 populations to prevent a significant decline must also be a high priority.

122 *Impacts on Livestock Production*

123 Wolves pose a significant concern to livestock producers. Recent experience shows that while  
124 the overall impact may not be significant on the industry as whole, individual producers can  
125 experience very large losses and management difficulties. Economic losses are not restricted to  
126 direct mortality, they also include more difficult to quantify effects of stress including lower  
127 than expected weight gain and lower calf production. Some livestock owners fear that the  
128 Department cannot be relied upon to respond promptly with effective tools, no matter what  
129 assurances are included in the Wolf Recovery Plan.

130 To establish credibility and build social tolerance, the Department must assertively use all  
131 management tools available. When the Department lacks capacity to effectively respond  
132 directly, it must enable livestock producers to rapidly utilize appropriate tools as outlined in the  
133 Plan, consistent with state and federal laws.

134 Practical, effective options for livestock owners must be promptly offered. Consistent with  
135 federal and state law, the options must offer reasonable and effective ways for livestock  
136 producers to protect their property. When a Department-issued permit is required, processing  
137 and issuance of the permit must be timely, efficient and offer enough flexibility to address a  
138 variety of situations.

#### 139 *Begin Development of a Post Delisting Management Plan*

140 The Wolf Recovery Plan establishes the management direction for recovering wolf populations  
141 in Washington State. Once recovery objectives are achieved, certain state protections will no  
142 longer be necessary.

143 With the recovery plan in place, it is now a priority for the department to begin development of  
144 a long term management plan to assure that recovered wolf populations do not cause undue  
145 harm to livestock interests, prey populations, and public safety while at the same time ensuring  
146 wolf population levels remain above recovery objectives.

147 The Commission directs the Department to take initial steps towards development of a statewide  
148 population management plan for wolves. At a minimum, the long term management plan must  
149 secure the health and persistence of wolves on the landscape above a level that would warrant its  
150 classification as threatened or endangered. The management plan must also adopt an approach  
151 that integrates wolves into a framework of holistic wildlife conservation that secures the health and  
152 stability of prey populations. The Commission will take an active role in the initial scoping process  
153 and throughout the development of the post-delisting management plan for wolves.

#### 154 Secure Management Authority for the State

155 Recent efforts to delist wolves in the Rocky Mountain States provide examples we hope to  
156 avoid, e.g., continuous litigation; management policy reversals; and disruptions in the  
157 assignment of authorities. Wildlife management has long been the prerogative of the states  
158 with important exceptions. Recovery of federally listed endangered species is one of those  
159 exceptions in which the role of the federal government role is well recognized.

160 It is vital that the Department act in a manner that secures and maintains authority for  
161 Washington State to manage wolves. Many management tools outlined in the Plan will not be  
162 available to the Department for the western two-thirds of the state if the federal Endangered

163 Species Act designation of “Endangered” status remains in place. The Commission believes our  
164 recent adoption and the Department’s implementation of Washington’s Wolf Recovery Plan  
165 will demonstrate to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service that wolf recovery and management can  
166 and will be appropriately managed by the Department.

167 Guidelines:

168 The Director will be responsible for wolf recovery and management decisions based on the  
169 following guiding principles:

- 170 • *Act in a manner that secures and maintains authority for the State of Washington to*  
171 *manage wolves;*
- 172 • *Maintain a viable and connected wolf population in a manner that minimizes the risk*  
173 *that the species will require protections through relisting under state or federal law;*
- 174 • *Prioritize agency budgets and staff resources to support wolf management and human*  
175 *conflict reduction;*
- 176 • *Take measures to assure that observations, reports of dangerous encounters,*  
177 *depredations, or other conflicts are reported, responded to and documented in an*  
178 *effective reporting system;*
- 179 • *Establish protocols for addressing “chronic problem wolves” and act assertively to*  
180 *reduce human-wolf conflicts in order to promote tolerance and respect for the law;*
- 181 • *Maintain timely, positive and effective working relationships with rural communities,*  
182 *livestock producers, hunters, conservation organizations, and other stakeholders;*
- 183 • *Actively engage in research and management aimed at reducing wolf impacts on*  
184 *livestock, including providing prompt, practical and effective options for impacted*  
185 *livestock owners;*
- 186 • *Actively engage in research and management aimed at reducing wolf impacts on big*  
187 *game populations;*
- 188 • *Place a very high priority on maintenance of sustainable hunter opportunity including:*  
189 *meaningful efforts to increase broad public understanding of the North American Model*  
190 *of Wildlife Conservation;*

- 191 • *Pursue public acceptance of sustainable ungulate and wolf harvest as a necessary part of*  
192 *managing wildlife and the ecosystems they depend upon; and.*
- 193 • *Embrace an adaptive approach to wolf recovery, management, and associated public*  
194 *communications.*

195 *Ongoing Concerns*

196 The Commission recognizes that wolf recovery poses unique challenges to the Department  
197 during a time when resources are diminishing. The Commission will continue to closely oversee  
198 the implementation of the Wolf Recovery Plan as progress is made towards delisting. If facts on  
199 the ground indicate that the Wolf Recovery Plan is not achieving its key objectives, the  
200 Commission will revisit its approach.

201 As more information becomes available, the Commission will review the following issues of  
202 concern:

- 203 • effectiveness of wolf population monitoring;
- 204 • effectiveness in addressing and management of wolf related impacts to ungulate  
205 populations;
- 206 • effectiveness in managing ungulate populations for public recreation opportunities;
- 207 • effectiveness of responses to human and livestock conflicts;
- 208 • regional abundance and distribution of wolves; and
- 209 • establishment of post-delisting management objectives.