

Oregon Wolf Conservation and Management 2023 Annual Report



This report to the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission presents information on the status, distribution, and management of wolves in the State of Oregon from January 1, 2023 to December 31, 2023.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The conservation and management of wolves in Oregon is guided by the Oregon Wolf Conservation and Management Plan (Wolf Plan). The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (department) annually reviews the work of the wolf program, gray wolf population status, and livestock damage management activities in order to inform its adaptive management under the Wolf Plan. In 2023 the department completed a five-year review of the Wolf Plan.

In 2023 wolves continue to be protected as a special status game mammal statewide. Wolves west of Highways 395/78/95 are listed under the federal endangered species act (ESA) making the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) responsible for management decisions regarding harassment and take in that area.

The department monitors the wolf population to determine the number of successfully reproducing pairs of wolves in each of two wolf management zones. Wolf Plan implementation is then based on these data. The wolf population in the West Wolf Management Zone (WMZ) continues to be managed under Phase I of the Wolf Plan and did not reach the conservation objective of four breeding pairs at the end of 2023. When four breeding pairs are documented for three consecutive years, the West WMZ will move into Phase II of the Wolf Plan. The wolf population in the East WMZ continued to exceed the Wolf Plan minimum management objective of seven breeding pairs and these wolves continue to be managed under Phase III of the Wolf Plan.

The minimum known count of wolves in Oregon at the end of 2023 was 178 wolves, the same as the 2022 minimum known count. Twenty-two packs were documented and 15 of those packs met the criteria as breeding pairs. In addition, 13 groups of two or three wolves were identified, but did not meet the definition of a pack. Wolves continued to expand westward in Oregon with ten resident groups of wolves in the West WMZ. Thirty-six wolf mortalities were documented during the year, including 33 that were human-caused.

The department monitored 51 radio-collared wolves, including 24 that were captured and radio-collared during 2023. By year's end, 26 of these wolves were still being actively monitored (15% of the minimum wolf count), while contact with the rest of the collars was lost due to collar failure, wolf death, or dispersal to other states.

There were 73 confirmed livestock depredation events during 2023. This was a slight decrease from 2022 to 2023, but depredation increased in the East WMZ by 27%. Consistent with the Wolf Plan, livestock producers implemented non-lethal measures to minimize depredation prior to any department approval of wolf lethal removal. Sixteen wolves in five packs were lethally removed in response to chronic depredation in the East WMZ in 2023.

The Oregon Department of Agriculture's (ODA) compensation program awarded grants totaling \$477,661 to 11 counties in 2023. The majority of the funds (84%) were used for non-lethal preventative measures to reduce depredation, and all requests for compensation of confirmed and probable depredations were granted in full.

OREGON WOLF PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Regulatory Status

Federal Status: Wolves west of Highways 395/78/95 in Oregon were listed under the federal ESA during 2023. In that federally listed portion of Oregon, the USFWS made all management decisions regarding harassment and take of wolves and collaborated on monitoring and non-lethal response to depredation. Also in that federally listed area, the department implemented the Wolf Plan within the sideboards of federal ESA regulations and under the guidance of the Federal/State Coordination Strategy (updated April 2019).

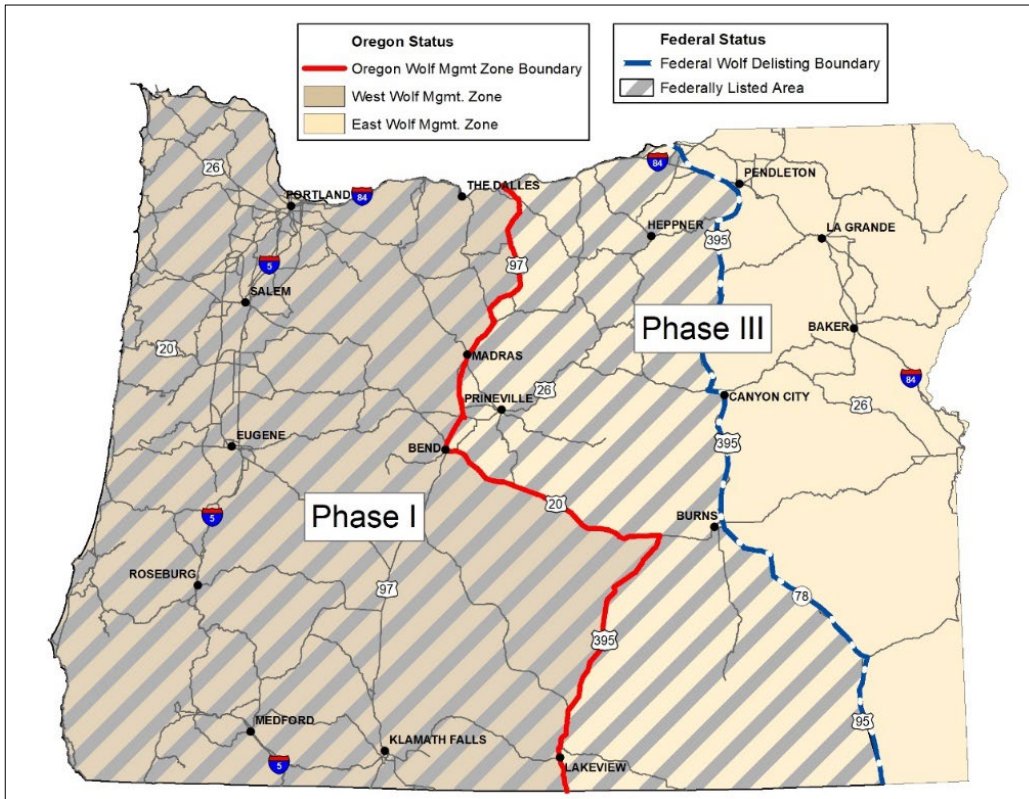


Figure 1. Wolf Management Zones in Oregon during 2023.

State Status: Wolves are protected statewide as a special status game mammal and are managed by the Wolf Plan guidelines and associated rules of each Wolf Management Zone Phase (Figure 1). Wolves in the West WMZ are managed under the more protective Phase I rules until their population reaches a minimum of four breeding pairs for three consecutive years. A **breeding pair** is defined as an adult male and adult female with at least two pups that survived to December 31 of the year of their birth. The wolf population in the West Wolf Management Zone (WMZ) did not reach the conservation objective of four breeding pairs at the end of 2023.

Wolves in the East WMZ continued to exceed the Wolf Plan management minimum population objective of seven breeding pairs for three consecutive years (the criteria for moving into Phase III). As such, wolves in the East WMZ continue to be managed under Phase III which focuses on the conservation of wolves while allowing more flexibility to address wolf conflict. This includes

continuing to emphasize the use of non-lethal deterrents to reduce livestock depredation and the use of lethal removal in certain situations where federally delisted.

In May 2023, the department initiated a five-year review of the Wolf Plan. The process included a department internal review, stakeholder discussions, a report on findings, and an Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission (Commission) workshop in December that was open to the public. The review found that the plan, as updated in 2019, is adequate to address implementation needs and guide wolf conservation and management in Oregon. The department will focus attention on addressing wolf-livestock conflict, reducing illegal take, and improving wolf population monitoring.

Population Status

Per the Wolf Plan, the wolf population is monitored by counting each wolf in the Phase I area and at the pack level in the Phase III area. Until a population model is developed and validated for Oregon, the department provides a minimum known number of all wolves present in Oregon at the end of each year. This is a direct count of wolves, not an estimate. These counts are conducted in the winter and not all wolves are located, so the actual number of wolves in Oregon is higher than this minimum count. The minimum known wolf count at the end of 2023 was 178, the same value as 2022 (Figure 2).

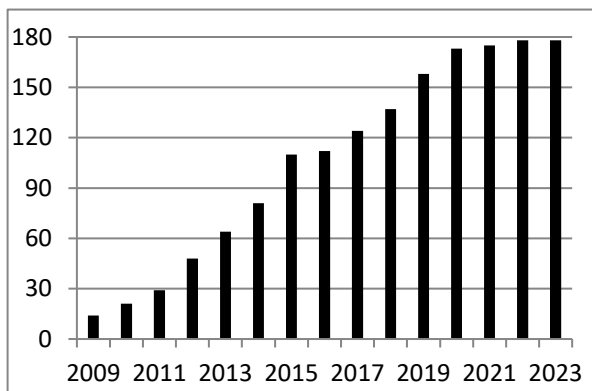


Figure 2. Minimum wolf count in Oregon (2009-2023).

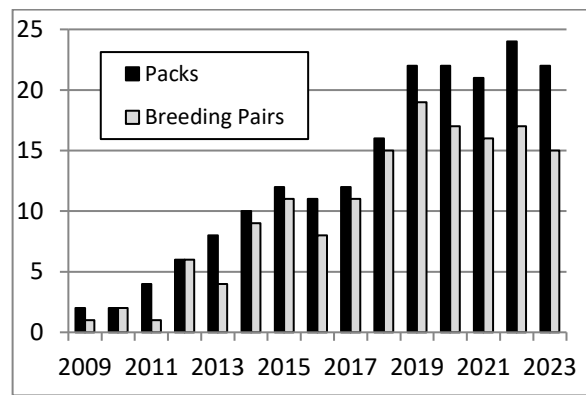


Figure 3. Number of packs and breeding pairs in Oregon (2009-2023).

For monitoring purposes, a **pack** is defined as four or more wolves traveling together in winter. Twenty-two packs were documented at the end of 2023 (Figure 3), with a mean pack size of six wolves (range 4 to 11). In addition, 13 groups of two or three wolves were identified. Throughout this report, **group** is used to denote two or more wolves traveling together. Reproduction was documented in 25 packs or pairs. At the end of 2023, 15 packs were documented as successful breeding pairs, two less than 2022.

Distribution: Areas of Known Wolf Activity (AKWA) at the end of 2023 are shown in Figure 4. AKWAs are designated by the department showing where an individual or group of wolves have been documented repeatedly over a period of time. When resident wolf activity is established, the department delineates AKWA boundaries using actual location data points. In situations where wolves are resident but location data is limited, the department uses a fixed circle representing an average home range size. North of Interstate 84 the AKWA polygon represents a wolf range of multiple overlapping resident packs over time.

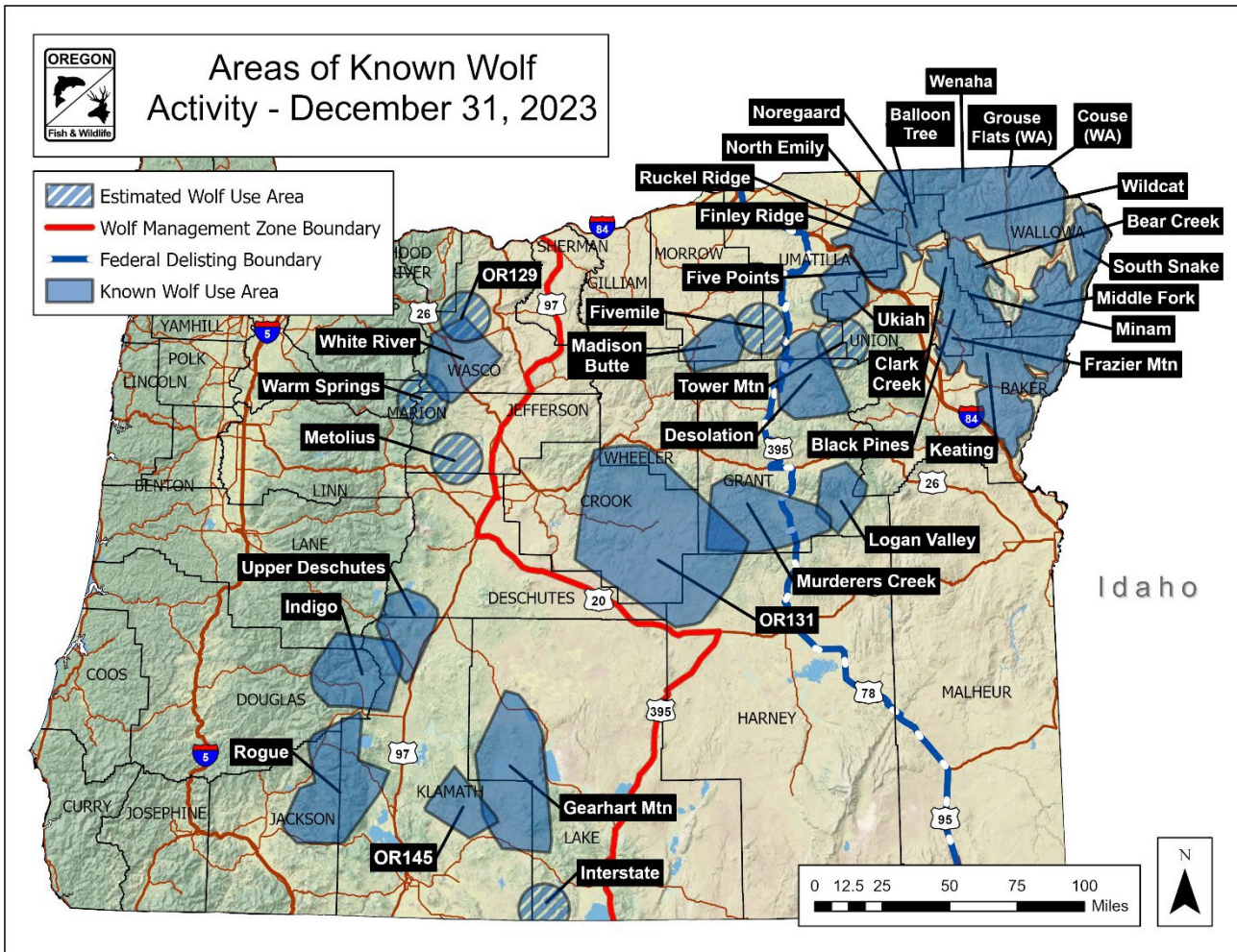


Figure 4. Distribution of known resident wolf activity areas December 31, 2023.

West Wolf Management Zone: Twenty-five percent of known Oregon wolves inhabited the West WMZ at the end of 2023 (n=45, Table 1). Wolves continued to expand in distribution with 10 AKWAs in the West WMZ, up from seven in 2022. Five wolves were documented alone or in pairs in Jackson, Deschutes, and Lake counties and may be the start of new packs or dispersers travelling through the area.

Table 1. Minimum wolf count in Oregon on Dec. 31, 2023 in the West Wolf Management Zone. Underlined packs were counted as breeding pairs.

Pack/Group	Total	Pack/Group	Total	Pack/Group	Total
Gearhart Mtn Pack	7	<u>Rogue Pack</u>	7	OR129 wolves	2
<u>Indigo Pack</u>	4	Upper Deschutes Pack	5	OR145 wolves	2
Interstate wolves	2	<u>Warm Springs Pack</u>	7	other wolves	5
Metolius wolves	2	White River wolves	2		

East Wolf Management Zone: Seventy-five percent of known Oregon wolves resided in the East WMZ at the end of 2023 (n=133, Table 2). There were 17 packs in the East WMZ, one less than 2022 (Table 2). Madison Butte (formerly called WA123 wolves) was a new pack in Morrow County and counted as

a breeding pair. Ten wolves were documented alone or in pairs in Baker, Crook, Morrow, Umatilla and Wallowa counties and may be the start of new packs or dispersers travelling through the area.

Table 2. Minimum wolf count in Oregon on Dec. 31, 2023 in the East Wolf Management Zone. Underlined packs were counted as breeding pairs.

Pack/Group	Total	Pack/Group	Total	Pack/Group	Total
<u>Balloon Tree Pack</u>	7	<u>Frazier Mtn Pack</u>	6	North Emily wolves	3
Bear Creek Pack	4	Keating wolves	3	Ruckel Ridge wolves	3
Black Pines Pack	4	Logan Valley wolves	3	<u>South Snake Pack</u>	9
<u>Clark Creek Pack</u>	5	<u>Madison Butte Pack</u>	4	Tower Mtn Pack	4
<u>Desolation Pack</u>	7	<u>Middle Fork Pack</u>	11	<u>Ukiah Pack</u>	6
Finley Ridge Pack	4	<u>Minam Pack</u>	10	<u>Wenaha Pack</u>	9
Five Points Pack	4	Murderers Crk wolves	1	<u>Wildcat Pack</u>	5
Fivemile wolves	1	<u>Noregaard Pack</u>	10	other wolves	10

Wolves from the Couse (previously called WA139 group), Grouse Flats, and Touchet Packs from Washington had locations in Oregon during 2023, but denned in Washington and are not counted in Oregon’s annual count. Information about Washington packs is available at www.wdfw.wa.gov.

Translocation to Colorado: The department authorized Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) to capture and translocate 10 non-breeding wolves as part of their wolf reintroduction effort. CPW caught wolves from packs in northeast Oregon and moved them to Colorado in mid-December. Those wolves were not included in the 2023 Oregon wolf count. The department provided support before and during capture operations, but the majority of staffing and all expenses were covered by CPW. More information is available at <https://cpw.state.co.us>.

Monitoring

The department deployed radio-collars on 24 wolves during 2023; this figure includes collars deployed on one wolf incidentally captured by Wildlife Services, five wolves incidentally captured by licensed trappers, and six wolves collared during the CPW capture process. Data were collected from 51 radio-collared wolves in 29 separate areas of wolf activity during 2023. After collar failure, wolf deaths, and dispersal, 26 wolves were still being monitored at year’s end (15% of the minimum wolf count).

The department monitored ten radio-collared wolves dispersing in 2023. Seven wolves dispersed within Oregon, one dispersed to Idaho, and two wolves dispersed from Washington into Oregon.

In addition to monitoring information downloaded from GPS radio-collars, department biologists monitored radio-collared and accompanying wolves from the air and ground, implemented track and howling surveys, followed-up on public wolf reports, and conducted remote camera surveillance within areas of known or suspected wolf activity.

Mortalities: Thirty-six wolf mortalities were documented during 2023 (20 in 2022) with six occurring in the West WMZ and 30 in the East WMZ (Table 3). The breeding female of the Wenaha Pack died of natural causes (osteosarcoma - bone cancer) and due to advanced decomposition of remains, the cause of death is unknown for two wolves (one in Keating Pack, one in Balloon Tree).

Thirty-three wolf deaths were human-caused. One wolf in the Logan Valley Pack was lawfully shot for personal safety. Four wolves were killed in separate motor vehicle collisions on state or interstate highways: one from the Indigo Pack, one in the White River Pack area, one disperser in Umatilla County, and one in Wallowa County. Sixteen wolves were lethally removed for chronic livestock depredation (see Livestock Depredation Management section below).

Eight wolf deaths are under investigation by Oregon State Police (OSP) in the federally delisted portion of Oregon. An adult from the Cornucopia group was shot in Baker County. Seven wolves died from poison including two from the Keating Pack, two from either the Walla Walla or Noregaard Pack, one from the Finley Ridge Pack, one from the Chesnimnus Pack, and a disperser from Washington near the same location in Wallowa County.

The USFWS Office of Law Enforcement, with assistance from OSP, is investigating four wolf deaths in the federally protected portion of Oregon. These include the death of a disperser in Jackson County in November and three Gearhart Mountain Pack wolves, including the breeding female, in December in Klamath County.

Table 3. Documented wolf mortalities in 2023 by Wolf Management Zone.

Mortality Source	West WMZ	East WMZ
Natural or Unknown		3
Human Safety		1
Vehicle Collision	2	2
Chronic Depredation Removal		16
Under Investigation	4	8

Information and Outreach

Wolves continue to be a subject of high interest in Oregon. Extensive one-on-one communication occurs between staff and a wide range of individuals and audiences, but staff also conduct numerous media interviews and presentations to schools, universities, agencies, agricultural organizations, conservation groups and county compensation committees.

In October, the department released a short video, Understanding Wolves: Dispersal, which received 28,000 views by year’s end. The video follows specific Oregon wolves as they disperse from their natal packs and travel long distances in search of new territories and mates. A series of similar videos using Oregon wolf data are in preparation for future release.

The department continues to maintain its wolf website, “Wolves in Oregon” (www.odfw.com/wolves), which provides the latest updates and information about Oregon wolves, wolf management, specific wolves and packs, livestock conflict, and a submission form for wolf sightings. In 2023, content on these pages was viewed over 200,000 times, with mobile users accounting for over 60% of site traffic. Email updates regarding new information about confirmed and probable depredations and new areas of wolf activity or management actions were sent to over 13,000 subscribers.

Staffing and Funding

Two biologists coordinate statewide wolf program activities from the East Region office in La Grande. The federal grant budget allocation for the 2023-2025 biennium is \$968,771. This grant includes 75%

federal funds (Pittman-Robertson Grant Program) with 25% state match that comes from a combination of license dollars (8%) and Lottery Funds (17%). Three regional wolf biologists, stationed in Enterprise, Prineville and Central Point field offices, were funded by an allocation of \$992,896 General Fund for the 2023-2025 biennium. In addition, some district wildlife biologists and headquarters staff spend substantial amount of time and resources on wolf program needs and issues.

LIVESTOCK DEPREDATION MANAGEMENT

The department completed several changes to livestock investigations to reduce staff workload in 2023, including a new documentation process for more efficient determinations. The investigation categories and definitions used to describe the findings of wolf-livestock investigations were updated to be more concise and reduce confusion. The department no longer tracks ‘unknown’ and ‘not wolf’ determinations, so the annual report no longer includes information about how many livestock investigations are completed. In some areas of eastern Oregon, USDA Wildlife Services (WS) staff started conducting livestock investigations independently using the same evidence-based process and documentation protocol that department staff use.

There were 73 confirmed livestock depredation events (11 in West WMZ, 62 in East WMZ) and four probable depredations in 2023 (Figure 5). Statewide, confirmed depredation events decreased slightly from 2022 to 2023 (76 to 73) but depredation increased in the East WMZ by 27%.

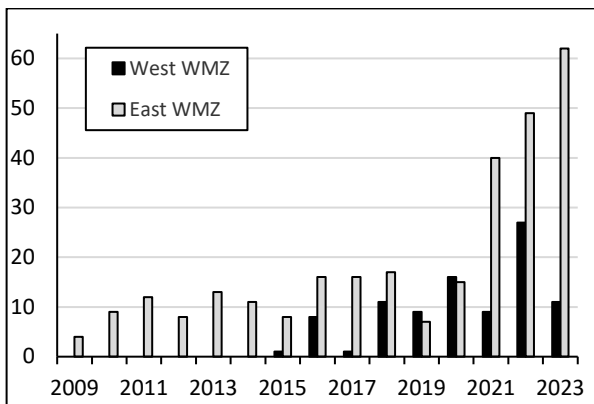


Figure 5. Number of confirmed depredations by Wolf Management Zone by year (2009-2023).

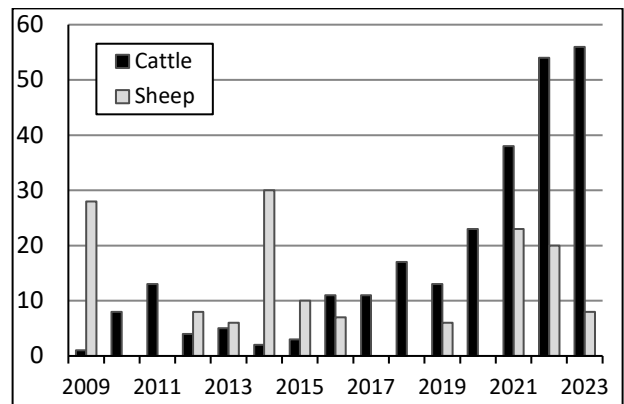


Figure 6. Number of confirmed cattle and sheep deaths from wolves in Oregon by year (2009-2023).

Confirmed livestock deaths in 2023 were 16 cows, 40 calves, eight sheep and two livestock working dogs (Figure 6). Eight cows, 17 calves and two sheep were confirmed as injured by wolves. In 2023, 84% of confirmed depredation events occurred on private land and 16% on public land. At least 20 packs/groups and one lone wolf depredated on livestock during 2023. Eleven of these packs/groups depredated one or two times, eight of them depredated between four and six times and one pack (Black Pines) depredated 10 times. Of the packs that were active at some point during 2023, 45% had no documented depredations. Confirmed depredations over time continue to occur at a lower trajectory than changes in the wolf count (Figure 7).

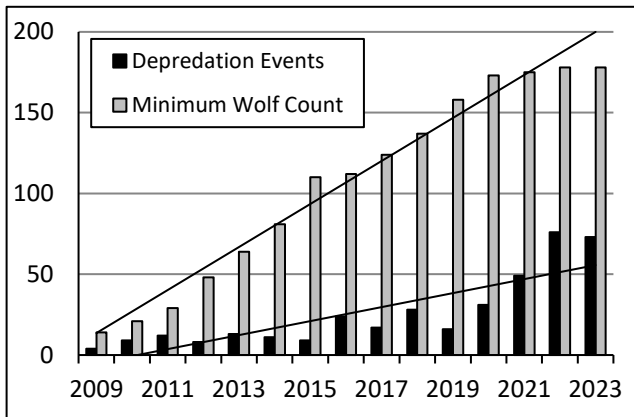


Figure 7. Number and trendline of confirmed depredation events and minimum wolf count in Oregon by year (2009-2023).

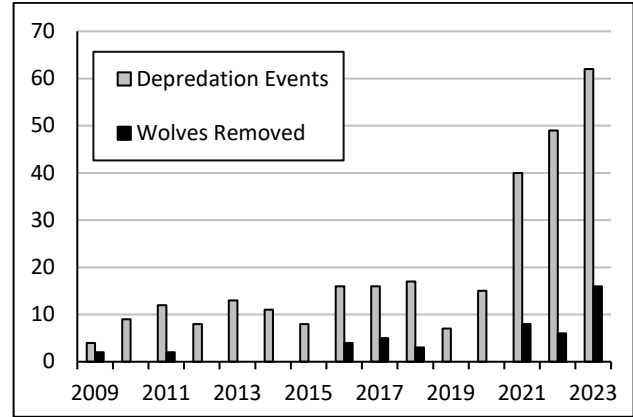


Figure 8. Number of depredation events and wolves removed for chronic depredation in the East WMZ by year (2009-2023).

West Wolf Management Zone

The department confirmed 11 depredations in the West WMZ, down from 27 in 2022. Depredations by the Rogue Pack decreased from 18 in 2022 to 5 in 2023. There were four depredations by the Gearhart Mountain Pack and two by the Metolius pair.

Livestock producers and WS implemented non-lethal measures funded by USFWS and ODA county compensation committees in Jackson and Klamath counties to reduce depredation risk in the Rogue and Gearhart Mountain Pack areas. Department staff installed fladry in the Metolius area. All harassment and take were regulated by the USFWS, and no lethal removal was authorized in this area.

East Wolf Management Zone

The department confirmed 62 depredations in the East WMZ, which is a large increase over 2022 (49). Department staff provided technical advice and non-lethal tools throughout Oregon. In central Oregon there was a focus on reducing attractants in new areas of wolf activity while the focus in northeast Oregon was reducing attractants and providing fladry in areas of depredating wolves. WS employed two new full-time agents to assist landowners in northeast Oregon.

Under Oregon Administrative Rule 635-110-0030 (Phase III), the department may lethally remove wolves or issue a limited duration permit for a livestock producer to kill wolves to minimize further conflict under a chronic depredation situation if non-lethal measures appropriate for the situation have been employed. Chronic depredation in the East WMZ requires at least two depredations in a nine-month period.

In 2023 the department received requests from livestock producers to lethally remove wolves in nine chronically depredating groups after non-lethal methods proved ineffective. One request was denied due to inadequate non-lethal measures being employed. Authorization was given in eight groups for incremental removal, with Black Pines Pack receiving a second authorization after it continued to depredate. Each group had at least three depredations in the previous nine months when lethal take was authorized. Sixteen wolves were lethally removed from five packs (BlackPines-8, Five Points-4,

Wildcat-2, Lookout-1, Couse-1) (Figure 8). The breeding female of the Black Pines Pack was the only breeder removed. The department removed six wolves, WS removed nine, and a livestock producer removed one. No wolves were taken while caught in the act of biting, wounding, killing or chasing livestock or working dogs.

Compensation for Wolf-Caused Losses

ODA’s Wolf Depredation Compensation and Financial Assistance County Block Grant Program provides four types of financial assistance options. It provides direct compensation for confirmed and probable wolf depredations (deaths and injuries) and payment for livestock reported as missing as a result of wolf depredation. Grant money is also awarded to participating counties to assist with costs to purchase supplies and implement preventative measures. Lastly, the program covers some county program implementation costs.

ODA awarded \$477,661 to 11 counties, an increase from \$393,682 awarded in 2022 (Table 4). ODA fulfilled 100% of county requests for confirmed and probable depredation compensation; no missing livestock claims were fulfilled.

Table 4. Funds awarded through the County Block Grant Program in 2023 (source ODA).

County	Confirmed/Probable Death/Injury	Prevention	Admin	Total
Baker	\$5,835	\$40,920	\$495	\$47,250
Grant	0	\$19,280	\$2,000	\$21,280
Harney	0	\$28,920	\$700	\$29,620
Jackson	0	\$48,200	0	\$48,200
Klamath	\$25,750	\$54,560	0	\$80,310
Lake	\$3,272	\$482	0	\$3,754
Morrow	0	\$8,194	\$1,728	\$9,922
Umatilla	\$7,045	\$68,200	\$750	\$75,995
Union	\$12,900	\$68,200	0	\$81,100
Wallowa	\$15,463	\$61,380	\$700	\$77,543
Wheeler	0	\$2,687	0	\$2,687
Award Amount	\$70,264 (15%)	\$401,023 (84%)	\$6,373 (1%)	\$477,661

The department’s primary roles in ODA’s compensation program are to delineate areas of known wolf activity and investigate dead or injured livestock to determine if wolf depredation has occurred. Some counties request the department provide input on wolf activity and appropriate preventative non-lethal measures. The USFWS federal prevention grant awarded to ODA to augment the compensation program was competitively awarded by continuing to use the salaries of the three department wolf biologists as part of the requirement for in-kind state matching funds.