

Wolf kills on the rise as livestock deaths continue

BILLINGS, Mont. (AP)--Wolves are being killed at an increased rate across the Northern Rockies this year as their population expands and wildlife officials seek to curb their appetite for livestock, state and federal officials said Sept. 10.

In Wyoming and Idaho, 90 wolves have been killed to date because of livestock run-ins. That matches the states' figures for all of 2006 even as livestock conflicts were expected to continue through the fall.

In Montana, 32 wolves have been killed this year by federal agents--11 more than at this point last year, said John Steuber, state director for federal Wildlife Services. The Montana figure does not include an unknown number of wolves killed by ranchers defending their livestock.

The rising death toll, coming off a record 142 killed in the three states last year, was attributed to the wolves' surging population.

Much of the best wolf habitat--where elk, deer and other wildlife are present in numbers dense enough to satisfy the carnivores' hunger--already is occupied, state and federal officials said. That leaves younger wolves to push into areas close to ranches, where sheep and cattle offer a tempting target.

As a result, officials have stepped up the removal of wolves.

"In areas we've had existing problems (with livestock kills), we've really hammered those wolves," said Ed Bangs, wolf recovery coordinator for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

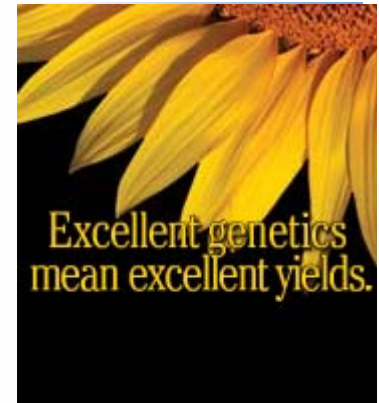
Federal officials plan to remove gray wolves in the Northern Rockies from the endangered species list in February, although court challenges are considered inevitable and could delay a final delisting.

Wolves in the Great Lakes region were taken off the endangered list earlier this year.

In the Rockies, non-lethal responses to livestock kills, such as hazing wolves away from a ranch, are used when they can be pushed into an area without livestock, said Steve Nadeau, large carnivore program coordinator with the Idaho Department of Fish and Game. The technique does not work when ranches lie in every direction.

"We have fewer options available to us in some of the areas where wolves are getting into trouble," Nadeau said. "We'll probably end up killing more than last year--somewhere around 20 percent over last year."

Wolves were driven to near-extinction across the American West last century.



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In the mid 1990s Canadian-born wolves were reintroduced by federal wildlife officials in central Idaho and Yellowstone National Park. More wolves entered northwest Montana from Canada, and the wolf population in the Northern Rockies has since grown to an estimated 1,300 animals.

"Wolves are very prolific," said Mike Jimenez, Wyoming leader of the Fish and Wildlife Service wolf project. "As they get more into areas with livestock and farther away from areas without livestock, we get more aggressive."

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