TEAM WOLF

3 THINGS EVERY WOLF MANAGEMENT PLAN MUST HAVE IN MIND

Photography by John Marriott

Over 2 million wolves once roamed North America.
Now only an estimated 6,000 Gray Wolves remain in the contiguous United States.

Wolves play a vital role in our ecosystems and wild landscapes.

They control deer and elk populations, protect riverbanks from overgrazing, and allow forests and meadows to thrive.

They have been shown to reduce collisions between deer and motor vehicles **by 24%, thereby saving human lives.**

They may even help slow the spread of chronic wasting disease a deadly illness devastating deer and elk herds across North America.

Even with all the good they do, wolves remain one of the most politically charged species in the country. Their presence often sparks public debate, political tension, and pressure from special interests. Too often, the result is costly litigation and management plans shaped more by politics than by science.

Despite the politics, most Americans stand with wolves. A nationwide survey found that 78% of Americans support keeping wolves protected under the Endangered Species Act, including three out of four rural residents and nearly 80% of farmers and ranchers. Even among conservatives, support remains strong. This broad support shows that protecting wolves isn't as controversial as certain politicians and anti-wolf groups want us to believe.

It's time state policy caught up with public opinion. A strong wolf conservation plan must look beyond fear and politics and focus on what truly works for people, for livestock, and for wolves.

Here are three things ***every*** wolf state should keep in mind when writing or updating their wolf management plans.

1 **No mandatory wolf hunts after delisting.**
When wolves are removed from the Endangered Species list, it should mark a milestone in recovery, not the immediate and irrational start of a slaughter.

The insanity of spending two decades to bring wolves back, only to turn around and kill them, was made vivid by Wisconsin's decision to authorize a wolf hunt just weeks after the species was delisted. In February 2021, Wisconsin rushed to hold its first hunting season in more than six years.

- In just the first three days, 218 wolves were killed, exceeding the season's quota by over 80 percent.
- More permits were sold (1,548) than there were wolves in the woods (1,091).
- On average, every 17 minutes a wolf was killed, including in inhumane ways such as being run down with hounds.

The hunt was so devastating that a judge ordered it to be immediately halted.

Later, it was discovered that a computer error in the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources' model may have inflated the quota by 16 percent.

By the end of the season, roughly one in five of Wisconsin's wolves were gone. Experts estimated it would take two to three years of zero hunting for the population to recover.

What's more, is that this same year, a 2021 poll by the independent Remington Research Group found that 60 percent of Wisconsin voters opposed hunting wolves.

This is why no wolf plan should include mandatory hunts.

When states treat delisting as immediate permission to kill, they undo decades of recovery work and often go against the will of the majority, driven instead by a few loud special interest groups.

2

A proactive, well-funded non-lethal strategy.
Real wolf management plans don't wait for conflict, they prevent it.

Research shows that non-lethal tools like fladry (flagged fencing), range riders, livestock guardian dogs, and carcass removal can reduce livestock losses **by an average of 91 percent**.

In contrast, lethal control methods only reduce conflicts by about **39 percent** and often make problems worse by disrupting wolf packs and encouraging unpredictable behavior.

Despite this, the federal agency responsible for wildlife management, USDA Wildlife Services, devoted less than 1 percent of its $286 million budget to non-lethal programs in 2023. That imbalance doesn't reflect science or reality. Most ranchers say they're open to using non-lethal deterrents, but the funding, training, and resources simply aren't there to help them succeed.

Some states are starting to take steps in the right direction, but there is much more work to do.

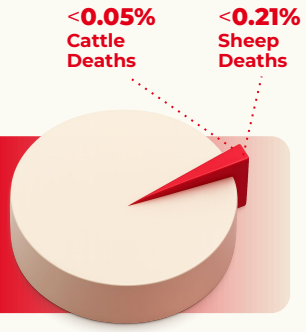
In Wisconsin, Governor Tony Evers proposed **$3.7 million** in state funding for wolf monitoring and conflict prevention.

In Minnesota, however, only about **$300,000** per year is dedicated to wolf recovery, drawn from 50 cents of every deer license sold.

Most non-lethal programs in Minnesota are still managed by federal or agricultural agencies, not the Department of Natural Resources. That needs to change.

The truth is that wolf-related livestock losses are extremely rare.

In states like Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, and Wisconsin, wolves account for **less than 0.05 percent of cattle deaths and 0.21 percent of sheep deaths each year**. Statistically, a cow is safer sharing pasture with wolves than it is from weather, disease, or accidents.



But when conflicts do happen, non-lethal tools, combined with quick response programs and on-the-ground monitoring, offer real protection for both ranchers and wolves.

Every state should dedicate stable funding to non-lethal coexistence programs, ensure ranchers can access those resources easily, and center science-based solutions over fear-based reactions. We already know what works; what's missing is the will to invest in it.

3

Full transparency and open access to wolf data.
The public has a right to know how wolves are managed, from how many are on the landscape to how many are killed each year and why.

Yet across the West, basic information about wolf populations, depredation claims, and lethal control remains hidden or difficult to access. In some states, even simple data like the number of traps set or the criteria for granting kill permits is not made public.

One study found that while states like Montana and Idaho have adopted increasingly aggressive hunting and trapping strategies, neither the states nor the federal government have reliable or easily accessible data on wolf kills, livestock losses, or non-target animals caught in traps.

The main sources of information include USDA livestock loss reports, USDA Wildlife Services data, and individual state wildlife reports, but these are inconsistent and outdated.

USDA livestock losses are published

only once every 5 years

while most state wildlife reports are annual and often lack key details. In many cases, important data is only obtainable through Freedom of Information Act requests.

One such request revealed that

nearly half of all animals caught in wolf traps

in states like Idaho were non-target species, including pets, mountain lions, and federally protected wildlife.

In Idaho, conservation advocates have called on the state to resume publishing detailed annual wolf reports, which have not been released since 2016. These reports once included population data, hunting statistics, and depredation details but have since been discontinued, leaving the public in the dark. This comes amid changes to the state's counting methods that many say overestimate the population, even as Idaho moves forward with plans to eliminate more than 60 percent of its wolves.

That lack of transparency erodes trust and fuels misinformation. When data is shared selectively, it becomes easier for politics to overshadow science.

Transparency also strengthens coexistence. By making information like non-lethal success rates fully public, both ranchers and advocates can identify what is working.

Open data helps prevent bad actors from operating in secrecy and allows independent scientists to analyze and improve management strategies in real time.

Every wolf management plan should commit to full public access to data.