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As California plans to live with wolves, be prepared to share the costs



A photograph by a remote camera taken in 2014 and provided by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service shows the wolf OR-7 in southwest Oregon's Cascade Range. The lone male came into California from Oregon in December 2011 and stayed for 15 months. **Uncredited** U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

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California's wolves are on the move. Just how many are haunting Northern California's backcountry, and where, shifts with the weather and prey. What's certain is that the elusive predators are here and more are coming.

As the most recent state to host returning wolves, California has a chance to learn from its neighbors around the West and avoid the conflicts that have beleaguered wolf management elsewhere.

Knowing that, California Department of Fish and Wildlife officials launched an evaluation of the potential for wolf recolonization before the arrival of [OR-7, a lone male](#) that slipped into the state from Oregon in December 2011 and stayed for 15 months. By the time his son showed up in Lassen County in November, California had a [plan to conserve the species](#) under its state endangered status, approved in 2014.

The 327-page document is a product of more than 40 raucous meetings with over 20 different interest groups. Its release last month has left ranchers indignant that they cannot kill or even harass wolves preying on their livestock; environmentalists are exasperated over its weak protections once two breeding pairs survive for two years.

"All we've managed to do is make everyone mad at us," said Karen Kovacs, a state wildlife program manager.

The conservation plan, which faced less overt resistance to wolves than expected, is deliberately designed to evolve as scientists gather information about how wolves adapt to this new landscape. Its flexibility offers a challenge to everyone engaged – willingly or not – in the return of wolves. How we respond will determine whether California benefits from the controversies elsewhere and gets it right for wolves, humans and ecosystems.

The challenge for ranchers is to accept that *canis lupis* is and will be a presence on the land. The government extermination programs of a century ago, driven by the livestock industry, will never be revived even under a Trump administration hostile to endangered species protections.

Instead of biting nails until wolf populations trigger thresholds that allow reduced protections, ranchers should find ways to live with wolves. It's time to accept that the price of wolves in California will be an occasional calf or lamb.

Wolf lovers need to let go of their widely hyped hopes that guardian dogs, range-riders and other nonlethal techniques are a panacea for livestock depredation. Wolves owe their astonishing recovery – back from the brink of extinction in a mere 20 years – to their wits.

Most find a way around flagging and flashing lights in a matter of months, forcing ranchers to switch to other means of protection short of illegal shooting. It's time for conservationists to accept that these ballyhooed methods are short-lived, and to find ways to help ranchers pay for the constant adaptations required to outsmart wolves.

There's work ahead for the public, too. The Fish and Wildlife Department has been running the wolf program on less than a frayed shoestring. It has designated no funding for Kovacs and her staff, forcing them to rely on federal grants due to expire in three years. "After that, I don't know," she told me. It's time for state legislators to adopt a budget that funds scientists to gather data needed to conserve and manage wolves.

The majority of Californians value wolves' return. Their serendipitous presence among us offsets the hopelessness of species extinctions. Arriving on their own, without the \$5-million-a-year investment required to save the California condor, wolves deepen the way we think about the land, charging it with wonder at a time when possibilities seem limited.

As we welcome this charismatic predator species to California we should be prepared to share the costs, tangible and intangible, of ensuring its future.

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