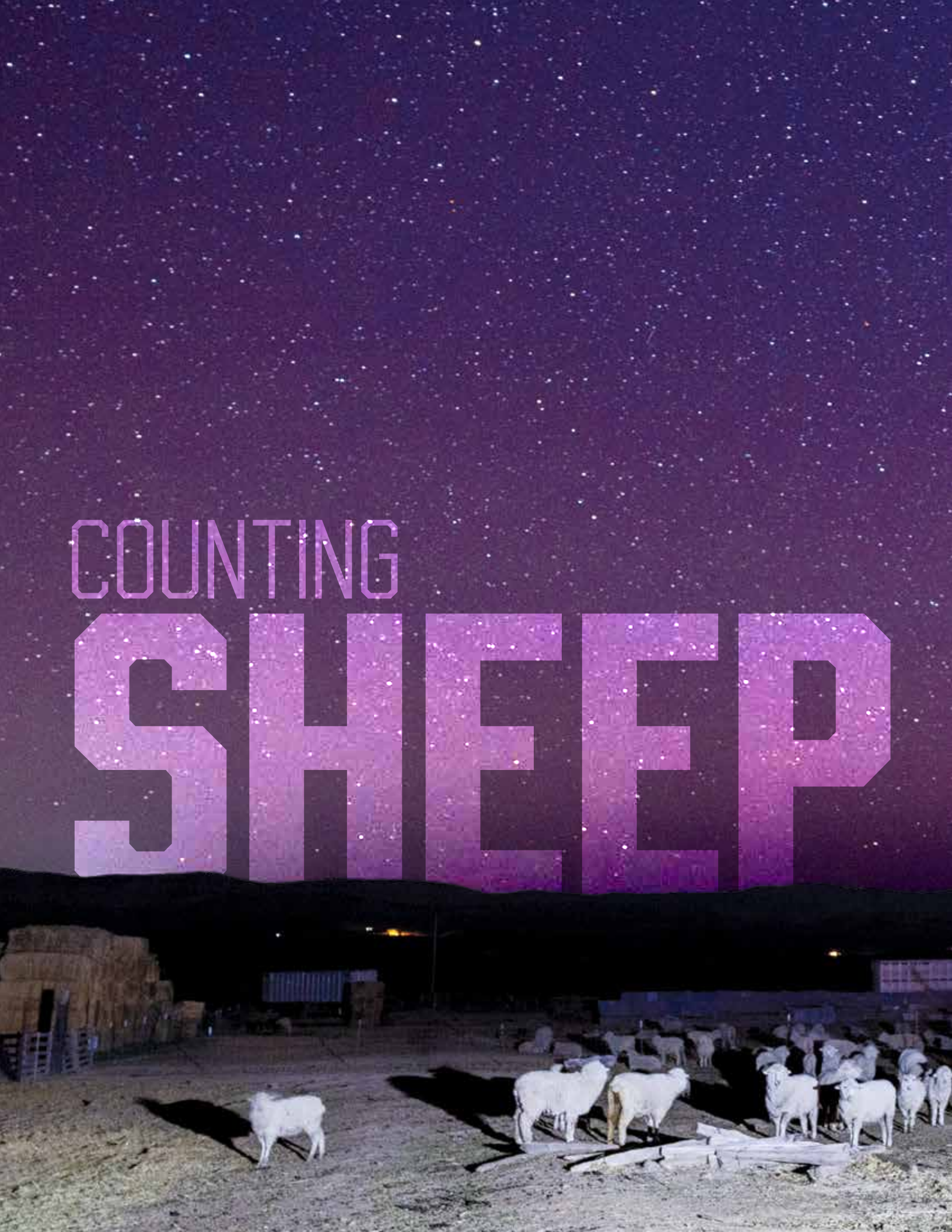
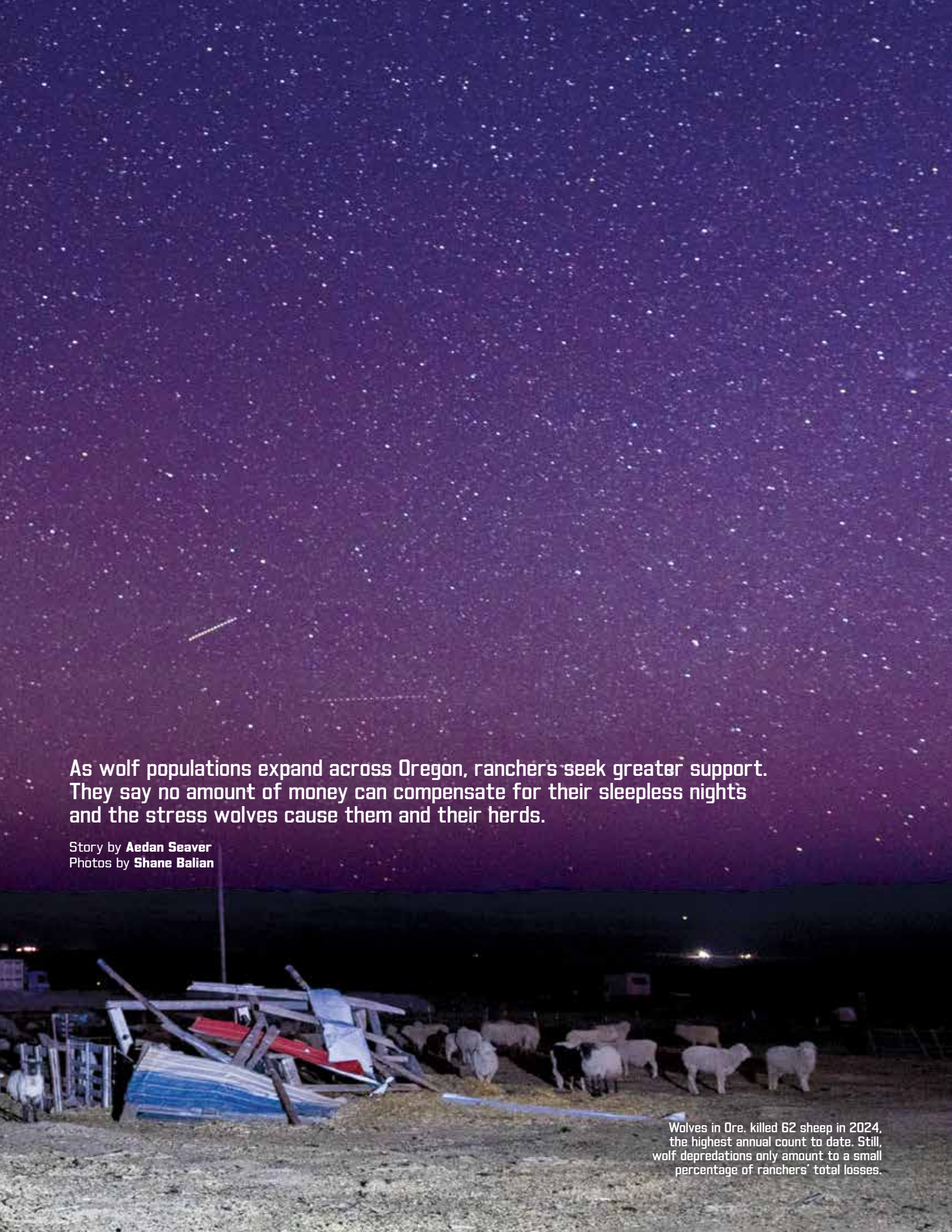

COUNTING
SHEEP

As wolf populations expand across Oregon, ranchers seek greater support. They say no amount of money can compensate for their sleepless nights and the stress wolves cause them and their herds.

Story by **Aedan Seaver**
Photos by **Shane Balian**



Wolves in Ore. killed 62 sheep in 2024, the highest annual count to date. Still, wolf depredations only amount to a small percentage of ranchers' total losses.

The hot morning air was oppressive, shimmering in the dry timber. Bleary-eyed sheep scrambled through brush, while guard dogs darted in and out of the trees. Panic hung in the air, churning with the smoke. By midday, the dogs lay panting in camp, unable to run any further. They hadn't eaten, drunk or lied down in 48 hours. At night, the howling made sleep impossible. The wolves were all around, and they were having fun.

In the summer of 2021, rancher Kim Kerns spent three weeks fending off a wolf pack. It followed her and her sheep herd through one of the 10,000+ acre allotments she leases from the federal government in Northeastern Oregon. Kerns said wolves killed around 15 of her sheep that summer, though only one loss was confirmed as a probable wolf depredation by the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife. By the time the other missing animals were discovered, their carcasses had decayed. It was too late to prove they'd been killed by wolves.

According to ODFW's 2024 report, at least 204 wolves now roam Oregon, up from 178 in 2023. Wolves currently account for just 1% of confirmed livestock killings in the states where they live, according to the Humane Society and the USDA.

"You keep hearing about this from conservation groups and pro-wolf people," Kerns said. "They're like, 'Statistically, this isn't a big deal,' and I'm like, 'You don't understand stress. You cannot fully grasp gut-wrenching stress until you've had a pack of wolves chasing you for three weeks, 24/7.' It is a level of stress I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy."

The presence of wolves in Oregon remains fiercely debated, but the fact remains: They aren't going anywhere.

Oregon has laws which govern wolf conservation and allocate money to repay livestock losses. The Oregon Senate recently passed two bills that aim to increase compensation for ranchers' losses and for their use of nonlethal wolf deterrents. But ranchers, conservationists and biologists agree that compensation isn't the full solution.



A wolf approaches a dead sheep near Lostine, Ore., on June 11, 2024. Lostine had six confirmed wolf depredations in 2024.

Many conservationists see reimbursing ranchers for losses as a waste of money. Some biologists say wolf management, which includes killing wolves that chronically target livestock, is necessary for the protection of livestock and the health of wolf populations. Ranchers say money cannot mitigate the loss of an animal nor the emotional and physical strain wolves put on their lives every day.

Wolves thrived in the Western United States until the mid-1800s, when settlers in many new territories, including Oregon, established wolf bounty systems. According to state records, this led to the complete extinction of Oregon's wolf population by the 1940s.

Public opinion shifted in the latter half of the 20th century. In 1974, gray wolves became protected by the Endangered Species Act. In 1995,



Fourth-generation rancher Kim Kearns runs a sheep ranch in Eastern Oregon. Kearns has been a moderate voice in the volatile debate over wolf conservation.



Kearns tends to a newborn lamb in a shelter at the ranch. Lambs are particularly vulnerable to disease, cold weather and predation.

the US Fish and Wildlife Service reintroduced 66 wolves from Canada into Yellowstone National Park and Central Idaho. The efforts sought to control deer and elk populations, increase biodiversity and preserve an iconic species. These transplants soon established breeding populations, and by 1999, wolves had arrived in Oregon.

In 2005, Oregon adopted the Wolf Conservation and Management Plan, a document that both protects wolves and allows them to be relocated or killed if proven to be preying on livestock repeatedly. The three-phase plan is designed to protect wolves until healthy populations are re-established and then maintain those populations while balancing conservation with the interests of the agricultural industry.

In March 2025, Republican Senator Todd Nash helped pass two Oregon Senate bills, SB 777 and SB 985. The first aims to increase ranchers' compensation to five times the market value of each animal killed by wolves. The second would allocate $2 million of the Oregon General Fund for this compensation. These bills have yet to pass in the House.

Proponents say the compensation multiplier would help account for unconfirmed livestock losses, as well as indirect effects of stress on herds, like lower pregnancy rates.

Though Kerns supports compensation for livestock deaths and injuries, she's worried about a recent amendment to SB 777 that would increase the portion of compensation money which must be put toward nonlethal deterrents.

"I don't ever want anyone to be able to say, 'Hey, we gave you $10,000. Why couldn't you make [depredations] not happen?' " Kerns said. Instead, Kerns wants "an adequate framework for management," which sometimes means killing wolves.

Kerns, a fourth-generation sheep and cattle rancher, has worked on her family's property outside of Baker City, Oregon, nearly all her life. She's had plenty of run-ins with wolves

Oregon Wolf Activity

'46

Bounty killing renders wolves virtually extinct in Oregon

'74

Gray wolves become protected by the Endangered Species Act

over the years. “We've had 500-pound calves that have had their jugular ripped out,” Kerns said. “It's just a crime scene. There's just blood sprayed as far as you can throw a rock where the animal was swung around by its rear end while it bled out.”

In January 2025, Kerns traveled to Arizona to attend the first meeting of the National Wolf Conversation, an effort funded by the USFWS designed to bring together various stakeholders in the American wolf debate in the name of “collaboration and trust-building.”

Kerns admitted she was skeptical at first. “I don’t really like hugging and I don’t really like singing Kum-ba-yah,” she said. But by day three of talking to representatives from government wildlife agencies, conservation groups and nonprofits, Kerns had grown optimistic. It was an opportunity to show non-ranchers what living in wolf country is really like.

Wolves are just one of many natural stressors ranchers face throughout the year. Wildfires, unpredictable weather and other predators pose major threats. According to Kerns, however, wolves are unique. They’re less scared of humans than coyotes, cougars, or bears, and they’re more willing to return again and again to prey on certain herds.

“It’s like the difference between dealing with a street gang and dealing with a little pickpocket,” Kerns said.

Wolves are extremely intelligent animals. If allowed to prey repeatedly on livestock, they’ll learn to seek out those herds. For wolves, cows and sheep are an easy meal. Unlike deer or elk, they’re always in the same place, and they don’t leave an area after one of their own is killed. Humans have bred out most of their natural survival instincts.

Kerns protects her herds with eight guard dogs and with electric fences at night. In the summer, she spends most of the day patrolling on horseback while her animals graze. She often sleeps on the range.

Kerns has tried most of the available wolf deterrent products, like colored flags on fences called fladry, noisemakers and flashing lights. In the end, she’s found human presence and guard dogs to be the most successful tool. “Everybody keeps trying to chase this silver bullet, and there just isn't one,” Kerns said.

Amaroq Weiss, a senior wolf advocate for the Center for Biological Diversity, thinks ranchers need to take more responsibility in protecting their livestock. Killing wolves, Weiss said, is a band-aid solution.

Weiss opposed SB 777, arguing the bill would “disincentivize the use of proactive nonlethal wolf deterrents” and “decrease social tolerance of living with wolves.” If compensation funds must be employed, she said, they should instead incentivize nonlethal measures like guard dogs and range riding.

According to the ODFW, of the nearly $790,000 awarded to ranchers for wolf issues in 2024, 61% went toward preventative measures.

Range riding, which means monitoring free-range herds day in, day out, is a full-time job. Employing guard dogs costs thousands of dollars a year.

“It is a business for [ranchers], and they're expecting to be able to get a return from their business,” Weiss said. “It is distressing to have to put in additional time that they're not used to having to put in — but that's because we wiped out all the wolves to begin with.”

For many ranchers, accepting wolf presence isn’t the issue. The real struggle is finding enough time to monitor herds scattered across tens of thousands of acres of privately-owned range, government allotments and tribal territory.

Brian Ratliff, a field biologist for the ODFW’s Baker City field office, tracks radio-collared wolves and investigates possible wolf attacks. As Ratliff explained, there often aren’t enough days or hours in the week for ranchers to monitor their multiple ranges, let alone sleep or take time off. So when a rancher has a depredation in one place because they were guarding another, Ratliff wonders, “Do I say you’re not doing enough?”

One night, Ratliff got a call and some photos from a rancher who’d found one of his cows dead. Ratliff couldn’t tell from the photos whether wolves were responsible, so he told the rancher to skin a few areas of the carcass in hopes of determining the cause of death.

“You know what he tells me?” Ratliff said. “He says, ‘I can’t. It’s my cow — I can’t do that to her.’”

When Ratliff came out to investigate, he was astounded by how gentle the rancher was with his cattle. He treated them like family. “You can’t pay somebody for that,” Ratliff said. “If I told you, ‘Hey, you need to skin out your grandma,’ could you do it?”

According to Ratliff, there are situations when killing a wolf is necessary. Wolves that chronically attack livestock will often teach their behaviors to their mates and pups. Within a few generations, Ratliff said, an entire pack of wolves can learn to only target livestock, even in areas where wild prey are plentiful.

Ratliff recommends ranchers use hazing, or “non-injurious” shooting, to scare off wolves. In extreme cases, he can issue a kill permit to landowners or remove the wolf himself. This, he said, can deter future attacks, prevent the need

’95

The USFWS introduces 66 wolves from Canada into Yellowstone National Park and Central Idaho

’05

As wolves return to Oregon, the state adopts the Wolf Conservation and Management Plan

’09

Wolves kill 24 sheep in Baker County’s Keating Valley, marking Oregon’s first wolf attack since reintroduction

’25

The Oregon Senate passes two bills, SB 777 and SB 985, which aim to increase compensation for ranchers affected by wolves

for extermination of an entire pack and discourage illegal wolf poaching.

In Western Oregon, where wolf populations are just starting to take root, landowners are not allowed to kill or haze wolves. East of highways 395, 78 and 95, however, hazing wolves is legal under Phase III of Oregon's Wolf Management Plan. With the proper permit, lethal removal is also allowed.

"Nobody's been able to give us a good reason to have them," Jim Richards, a cattle rancher in Pendleton, said. He hasn't accepted the return of wolves to Oregon. "Anything taken as far as cutting wildlife numbers down or anything else that some [pro-wolf advocates] are using for an excuse, other predators can do, or we can do with hunting.

Richards stepped back from his successful welding business in La Grande to ranch full time. Cattle are his livelihood, his passion and his way of giving back. In a business like livestock production, he explained, losing a few $2,000 calves to wolves can be the difference between turning a profit and going under.

"We're raising these in the long run to be food for human beings," Richards said. "They're going to die, but hopefully to do some good. We're raising the highest quality protein in the world, and we're not doing that to feed wolves."

In recent years, Richards said, multiple government agencies have helped monitor his herds and notify him of nearby wolf activity. The USDA has even killed wolves that preyed on his cattle. Still, he claimed proudly to have never applied for compensation. "The government doesn't owe me a living," he said.

Richards' attitude reflects a larger trend among some ranch-





Areas of Known Wolf Activity
as of Dec. 24, 2024.

- Known Wolf Use Area
- Estimated Wolf Use Area
- Baker County

Kim Kerns' property in Baker County, Ore., is located in an area with high wolf activity. Here, she facilitates the birthing process of her ewes each spring before turning them out to graze for the summer.



Kearns and her sheep herder visit land in Baker County, Ore. that they share with predators who may attack her livestock. Kearns' eight guard dogs patrol her flock.

ers of not reporting wolf depredations. To them, accepting government assistance means accepting that wolves are here to stay.

As Ratliff explained, this stubbornness does little to improve public perception of ranchers.

"The argument from the other side is 'Well, look, you didn't have any depredations,'" Ratliff said. "It's like, 'Well, I did, I just didn't frickin' tell anybody.'"

It's March, which means lambing season for Kerns. She hurries across the pasture toward her covered pen, holding a newborn lamb by its hind leg. Blood and feces stain the lamb's white wool red and yellow.

"If ranching were entirely based on economics, none of us would be doing it," Kerns said. "There is a practical business side to this, but we definitely get sucked in." Smiling, she glanced over at Piggles, her 300-pound pet pig. Piggles scratched her back on the bed of a pickup truck before lumbering off.

No matter what the future holds, Kerns will continue to do what it takes to care for her livestock. To her ewes and lambs, she is a delivery nurse, doula, parent and coroner. When wolves are in town, she's even a surgeon. After a wolf attack in 2023, Kerns and a ranch hand spent two hours sewing up a yearling ewe whose skin had been ripped off.

"She just held pieces of skin and I started stitching, and we put it back together like a jigsaw puzzle," Kerns said. "She not only survived, but she lambed last year."

Some might call that resilience. If you ask Kerns? "Lunacy."



Stress from predators can negatively impact the well-being of livestock, leading to weight loss and reduced pregnancy rates.