

Wolves' Removal from Endangered List a Disputed 'Success'

by Michelle Chen

Feb. 6 – With the federal government poised to remove some gray wolves from the Endangered Species List, environmentalists fear officials are prematurely celebrating "recovery" while ushering in mass slaughter.

Claiming success in rehabilitating the wolves from near extinction, the US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) contends federal protections for gray wolves in the Northern Rocky Mountain states are no longer needed. The agency has proposed to turn management of the wolves over to state and tribal authorities in Wyoming, Idaho, and Montana, as well as in parts of Washington, Oregon and Utah.

While many conservation groups say there has been promising growth in wolf populations nationwide, some argue that delisting Northern Rockies wolves could undo precarious progress.

Organizations such as [the Center for Biological Diversity \(CBD\)](#) warn the proposal would encourage people to slaughter wolves for sport or to prevent them from killing livestock. Currently, killing wolves protected by the Endangered Species Act even to defend livestock animals is restricted, though not completely barred; after delisting, restrictions on wolf slaughter would be set by individual states.

The FWS said it may keep a limited segment of Wyoming federally protected because the state's current wolf-management policy would allow slaughter of the animals at unacceptable levels.

In a statement opposing the delisting, [the CBD](#) called the action "both illegal and unsupported by science." [The group](#) helped block a separate 2003 initiative to de-list the wolves in the eastern and western United States in a lawsuit brought by environmentalists against the Bush administration. [The CBD](#) predicted the current proposal would also be thwarted through litigation.

Farming and hunting interests, represented by groups like Idaho Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife and the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, have pushed for the lifting of wolf protections, citing an economic threat from wolves preying on game and livestock animals.

The Fish and Wildlife Service supports the regulated killing of wolves. Ed Bangs, wolf recovery coordinator for the FWS, said state-permitted hunting can help control wolf populations that coexist with humans. "There's no reason that a recovered wolf population shouldn't be harvested in a way that doesn't cause it to be endangered again," he said.

Some environmentalists, however, advocate "non-lethal" wolf-recovery strategies that prioritize the protection and restoration of wolves over the maintenance of livestock operations. One non-lethal management tactic is giving ranchers monetary incentives to take a "predator friendly" approach to wolves. Last year, for example, Defenders of Wildlife sponsored an initiative at the Lava Lake Lamb sheep outfit in Idaho, in which ranchers installed electrified barriers and other security measures to deter wolves without killing them.

Rather than a patchwork of localized recovery programs, the New Mexico-based Rewilding Institute has mapped out a more holistic plan for restoring wolf populations in their historical range across North America. The group argues that true recovery should place wolves in protected, interconnected habitats so they can fulfill their "keystone role of ecosystem regulation," acting as essential predators to maintain a critical balance among different species populations.

The public will have a chance to respond to the delisting proposal in a series of meetings and hearings to be held from February 27 to March 8 in the affected states.