
Los Angeles Times

JANUARY 15, 2009

Gray wolves to lose endangered status

The Bush administration will remove wolves in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan, Idaho and Montana from the endangered species list. Environmentalists hope Obama will reverse the action, or they'll sue.

By Jim Tankersley

Reporting from Washington -- Bush administration officials said Wednesday that they would remove gray wolves in the Midwest and the northern Rocky Mountains from the endangered species list -- the latest, but probably not last, chapter in the wolf's on-again, off-again federal protection.

The Interior Department decision would apply to wolves in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan, Idaho and Montana. It would maintain protections for wolves in Wyoming, where the department says state officials haven't done enough to ensure the wolves' continued recovery.

An Interior Department official told reporters that the decision represented a victory for conservation efforts.

But the move, less than a week before President Bush leaves office, could be short-lived. Environmental groups hope President-elect Barack Obama will quickly reverse it after his inauguration. If he doesn't,



Associated Press / US Fish & Wildlife, File

Gray wolves are set to be removed from the Endangered Species List, sparking a fight with environmentalists.

the groups, which have blocked previous efforts to delist the wolf in court, say they'll sue again.

Obama spokesman Nick Shapiro said Wednesday that the president-elect "will review all 11th-hour regulations and will address them once he is president." A Senate committee could shed more light on the issue today when it questions Obama's choice for Interior secretary, Sen. Ken Salazar (D-Colo.).

The gray wolf, a symbol of the nation's wild heritage to some but the bane of ranchers and livestock, is fiercely debated in the West. The

wolves once roamed most of the continental United States but had largely vanished before the Clinton administration began reintroducing them in the mid-1990s, starting in Yellowstone National Park.

Populations grew quickly, and a decade after reintroduction, Bush officials tried several times to remove the wolf from the endangered species list but were thwarted by court rulings.

"It's kind of the Guantanamo Bay of wildlife management," said Jonathan Lovvorn, chief counsel of the Humane Society of the United States. "These guys have tried over

the last eight years to come up with a reason that it's legal, but they still can't do it."

Environmentalists said Wednesday's decision wouldn't survive a challenge either. The wolf population in the northern Rockies isn't large enough to be considered "recovered," said Andrew Wetzler, director of the endangered species program for the Natural Resources Defense Council.

And, he added, "as a legal boundary, they can't be not endangered in Idaho and Montana but endangered in Wyoming."

The wolf is perhaps the highest-profile example of a continuing court battle between environmentalists and the Bush administration over endangered species.

On Wednesday, the Center for Biological Diversity fired a final shot of sorts, suing or declaring its intent to sue over the handling of 19 species, including the San Bernardino kangaroo rat and the Colorado River cutthroat trout.

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