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Wolf hunt will go on for now, court says

But the judge who made the decision hints the animals may eventually be returned to the endangered species list.

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Idaho wolf hunters get to stay in the woods through spring 2010 after a federal judge's decision late Tuesday.

But U.S. District Judge Donald Molloy said that in the long run he expected to rule in favor of 13 environmental groups that seek to return wolves in the Rocky Mountains to federal protection.

His decision denying their request for an injunction that would have stopped wolf hunts rewards Idaho and Montana - and the sportsmen's groups that backed them - for setting conservative wolf limits.

Idaho demonstrated its commitment to control the hunt Wednesday when it cited an Eagle man after a wolf was shot in a zone not open for wolf hunting. The hunter, Randy Strickland, was cited on charges of shooting a female wolf pup out of season and shooting it from a road.

"We have a plan in place for managing wolves based on the best science available, and we intend to keep our promises outlined in that plan," Gov. Butch Otter said Wednesday.

Molloy's preliminary assessment that the federal government erred when it dropped Wyoming from the delisting, gives the Obama administration essentially three choices for resolving the issue.

- It can continue to try to convince Molloy that the decision to delist wolves in Idaho and Montana and not Wyoming is sound.

-The administration can seek a settlement with environmentalists and the states.

- Interior Secretary Ken Salazar can try to convince Wyoming lawmakers to approve a management plan similar to those in Idaho and Montana.

"Would it be good for Wyoming to have a more defensible plan? My simple answer is yes," said Paul Turcke, an attorney who represented the group Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife-Idaho.

Wyoming Attorney General Bruce Salzburg said the state doesn't intend to change its plan, which allowed wolves to be shot on sight in more than 50 percent of the state.

Wyoming has brought its own lawsuit against the Obama administration, saying its decision to leave the state's wolves under federal protection was based on politics, not science.

"We think our regulatory mechanisms are adequate to maintain Wyoming's share of the recovered population," Salzburg said.

Ultimately, it would be up to the Wyoming Legislature to make those policy changes, Salzburg said.

But Otter communication director Mark Warbis said Idaho still has hopes the federal government will win in federal court, which would keep Idaho and Montana in control of wolves.

"We are not assuming any outcome," he said.

Environmentalists were also quick to declare victory since Molloy said he thought they would eventually prevail. But the idea that hunters would continue to kill up to 295 wolves in the two states was a disappointment.

"A hunting season for wolves at this point in time still poses a threat to the Northern Rockies population," said Rodger Schlickeisen, president of Defenders of Wildlife.

The ultimate endgame for many of the environmental groups would be a national wolf recovery plan instead of the piecemeal approach the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has taken, said Louisa Willcox of the Natural Resources Defense Council.

"(The federal government) could set up a (national) recovery team this afternoon and they could have a recovery plan written within one year, fully vetted, signed and ready for implementation on Sept. 9, 2010," said Michael Robinson, a spokesman for the Center for Biological Diversity.

Even if environmentalists and the Obama administration could settle on a national recovery plan, there's a vast disagreement on the number of wolves that should be allowed in the West. While the current population of more than 1,600 is too many for many lawmakers, sportsmen and ranchers, wolf advocates seek a population from 2,000 to 5,000.

Nate Helm, executive director of Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife-Idaho feels vindicated by the judge's decision since he has walked a fine line between anti-wolf groups and other sportsmen by supporting the state. But he wants Idaho to preserve its right to dramatically reduce what he considers high wolf numbers.

"When hunters are unable to check wolf populations we will be asking the (Fish and Game) commission to use every tool in the tool box to get recovery of our ungulate herds," Helm said.

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