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U.S. loses ruling on wolves

Associated Press

GRANTS PASS, Ore. A federal judge ruled Tuesday that the Bush administration violated the Endangered Species Act when it relaxed protections on many gray wolves.

The decision by U.S. District Judge Robert Jones in Portland rescinds a rule change that allowed ranchers to shoot wolves if they were attacking livestock, said Michael Robinson of the Center for Biological Diversity, an environmental group.

In April 2003, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service divided the wolves' range into three areas and reclassified the Eastern and Western populations as threatened instead of endangered. The Eastern segment covers the area from the Dakotas east to Maine, while the Western segment extends west from the Dakotas. The agency left wolves in the Southwest classified as endangered.

But the judge ruled the government acted improperly by combining areas where wolves were doing well, such as Montana, with places where their numbers had not recovered.

"Interior Secretary Gale Norton tried to gerrymander the entire contiguous 48 states so that wolves in a few areas would make up for the absence of wolves in much larger regions," Robinson said.

Fish and Wildlife expressed disappointment in the ruling.