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## Who pays for wolves once they are delisted?

States don't want to: The government says wolves are a recovered species and wants to turn over the expense of tracking them to states where they live

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*The Associated Press*

BILLINGS, Mont. - Since it first declared gray wolves in need of protection, the federal government has footed the bill to help rebuild the predator's population in the Northern Rockies.

But with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service now declaring wolves recovered and eager to hand off full management to the three states involved, the question becomes: Who will pay to manage the predators then?

It's not an easy question.

"It hasn't been worked out," said Eric Keszler, a spokesman for the Wyoming Game and Fish Department. "Obviously, it's going to be an expensive thing to do. I don't know where the money is going to come from."

The money spent by the federal

government appears to have had the intended effect: The wolf population has risen from a few stragglers in northwest Montana to roughly 1,000 today in Montana, Idaho and Wyoming.

Many ranchers believe the wolves should remain the financial responsibility of the federal government, which - over their objections and worries about livestock losses - reintroduced the predators to Yellowstone National Park and central Idaho 11 years ago.

Some conservationists argue that if the states truly want to take on management, they should be willing to assume what comes with that - including costs.

And state wildlife managers, faced with budgets stretched thin by other obligations, want help from Congress - building from the idea that

the American public has a vested interest in the longterm future of the iconic wolves.

"So far, Congress has supported the management of wolves to a fairly substantial level," said Steve Nadeau, large carnivore manager with Idaho's Department of Fish and Game. "But with all the funding shortfalls and all the agency cutbacks, the longterm prognosis is an open question."

Fish and Wildlife Service officials say there's little precedent for continued agency involvement once a species is delisted.

In over 30 years, just 10 species recovered by the agency have successfully come off the endangered species list, according to the agency's Michelle Morgan. Of those, the agency paid only for surveys of peregrine falcons, under a post-delisting monitoring plan for the raptor. "Right now we don't have any precedent other than that," she said.

"The goal is to recover species and give them to the states, and we can then put our resources into species with other needs," Fish and Wildlife spokeswoman Valerie Fellows said.

Managing wolves in the Northern Rockies isn't cheap: The Fish and Wildlife Service estimates that for each year wolves remain listed, it will cost the government about \$2.7 million. That covers such things

This grey wolf pup from the Calder Mountain pack along the Montana and Idaho borders is one of the roughly 1,000 wolves in the Northern Rockies. The government says wolves are no longer endangered.

(Kent Lauden/The Associated Press)



as monitoring, public outreach and tracking down and killing problem wolves.

That's more than what was spent in 2004 by state and federal agencies to manage nearly four times as many wolves in the upper Midwest, the agency's Ron Refsnider said, citing figures he said were the most recent. Federal wildlife officials earlier this month proposed delisting those wolves.

Ed Bangs, wolf recovery coordinator for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Helena, said the amount of money spent in the Northern Rockies is ridiculous.

"It isn't that wolves need this kind of management. It's people want this kind of management," Bangs said. "Everybody wants to know everything. Everybody wants a radio collar on them. Everyone wants to know what they're doing every minute of the day. Expectations drive costs through the roof."

A lot of that has to do with the culture of the West and the lay of the land, he said. It's far different than, say, the Midwest, where wolves were not reintroduced but naturally recolonized. And in the Northern Rockies, the potential for conflict is particularly high because of vast expanses of open country and a patchwork of federally protected and privately held lands, Bangs said.

"It's very hard to keep wolves alive out here," he said.

Ranchers like John Helle say wolves have cost them money, and they like knowing how many are around. Wolves, Helle said, can take a sizable chunk out of a producer's bottom line, requiring the need for more sheepherders and guard dogs and driving down livestock weights. That's not to mention the added stress of simply having wolves around.

He has tracking gear provided by the government that picks up on wolf radio collar signals. But, he said he doesn't know all the frequencies and cannot tell for sure if the signal is from "400 yards or 20 miles away."

"Wolves are in direct conflict with the way we live in the West now," said the Dillon-area rancher, who believes wolves have been responsible

for killing hundreds of his family's sheep but has been able to confirm fewer than 50. "We can always look back at history; they just did not fit with a civilized West."

State wildlife officials expect the cost of wolf management to rise, at least initially, once delisting occurs and management authority falls completely to them.

It's not clear yet when that might happen: Before delisting is proposed, all three states must have federally approved wolf management plans. Montana and Idaho do. Wyoming does not and has sued over the agency's rejection of its plan.

Currently, Montana and Idaho handle most day-to-day management responsibilities for wolves within their borders, but the Fish and Wildlife Service still handles law enforcement and litigation and is involved in ongoing research projects. Those duties also would fall to the states after delisted, Bangs said.

Wildlife Services, the federal predator-control agency that carries out kill orders for problem wolves, will continue its work after delisting, Bangs said.

Wolf management in Montana and Idaho is funded largely through money earmarked for that purpose in the Fish and Wildlife Service budget, Bangs said. Once wolves are no longer listed, he said, the administration and Congress will have to decide what's fair.

He believes there will be some measure of federal dollars and, like other wolf managers, doesn't believe the funding question will hold up delisting.

Still, they say, it needs to be decided. Federal grants could ease the cost of at least a portion of the states' management costs, but in some cases, such programs require a match. Montana is looking at how it might "share" the costs, tapping into federal, state and private sources.

Idaho, in its wolf management plan, says it's under no obligation to manage wolves if Idaho's congressional delegation can't secure "ongoing adequate funding" to cover the costs.

Kieran Suckling, a policy director for the Center for Biological Diversity, said he sympathizes with the

states. However, "What I see now is a rush to delist, and everyone sitting around pointing fingers," he said.

"You have to create the safety net before you can leap off the cliff. They're basically saying, 'Jump, and we'll figure it out later.'"