



AP Wire - Washington

Feds rescind rule dropping wolves as 'endangered'

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By JOHN FLESHER / Associated Press

With a new administration in charge, federal regulators Wednesday promised a second look at a recent decision to drop gray wolves in the Great Lakes and Northern Rocky Mountains from the endangered list.

The Interior Department said it was withdrawing at least temporarily a rule announced last week changing the wolf's status in both regions. The rule never formally took effect.

It was among many regulatory changes the Bush administration pushed through in its final days. President Barack Obama ordered a review of those 11th-hour measures after taking office Tuesday.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, part of the Interior Department, will consider whether to reissue the rule, modify it or permanently rescind it, spokesman Hugh Vickery said. No timetable was set for a decision.

Last week, the department said Great Lakes and Northern Rockies wolves had recovered from near-extinction and no longer needed federal protection. However, wolves in Wyoming were to remain under federal jurisdiction because Interior officials said that state had not done enough to assure their survival.

The Bush administration removed wolves in both regions from the endangered list previously, but was overruled by federal courts after animal-rights and environmental groups sued.

Opponents said they hoped Obama's Interior Department would retain the endangered classification for wolves in the Northern Rockies, where the population numbers about 1,500.

That region's wolf segment includes all of Montana, Idaho and Wyoming, the eastern one-third of Washington and Oregon, and a small part of north-central Utah.

"Wolves are a success story in the region but their numbers simply haven't reached a level yet where they can be said to have recovered," said Andrew Wetzler, endangered species coordinator for the Natural Resources Defense Council.

Some advocates see in the review an opportunity to expand the wolf's modern-day range.

The predators historically were found across most of the United States. Vast swaths of public land in Colorado, California, Utah, Oregon and other states could support wolves if given the chance, said Michael Robinson of the Center for Biological Diversity.

"We're not looking to restore wolves to every bit of land where wolves once set foot," he said, "but certainly we have to look at the public lands at a minimum as potential wolf recovery areas."

Critics said they feared politics would trump science during the planned review. They noted that the Northern Rockies have five times the region's original recovery goal of 300 wolves.

As the population has risen, attacks on sheep, cattle and other livestock have increased.

"It just frustrates landowners to no end that this process looks like it will never end and we'll never see wolves delisted," said Jay Bodner of the Montana Stockgrowers Association.

Removing wolves from the endangered list is less controversial in the Great Lakes region, where even many environmental groups — such as the Sierra Club and the National Wildlife Federation — favor it. About 4,000 wolves roam Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

But the Humane Society of the United States, which filed suit after their endangered classification was dropped in 2007, will urge the Obama administration to keep Great Lakes wolves on the list as well, vice president Jonathan Lovvorn said.

Associated Press reporter Matthew Brown in Billings, Mont., contributed to this story.