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Feds plan retreat on Northern Rockies wolf hunting

By Matthew Brown
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BILLINGS, Mont. — The government is planning to retreat for now from its attempt to take gray wolves in the Northern Rockies off the endangered species list, a federal wildlife official said Tuesday.

Ed Bangs with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said the government in the next week expects to withdraw a rule that had declared wolves fully recovered. That rule, issued in March, would have allowed public hunting for the region's wolves for the first time in decades.

Wildlife agencies in Montana, Idaho and Wyoming already have started preparations for such hunts. But they had been in doubt since July, when U.S. District Judge Donald Molloy blocked the states from going forward pending resolution of a lawsuit by environmentalists.

Meanwhile, the latest population estimates for wolves show their numbers in decline for the first time in more than a decade, to 1,455 animals. That goes against government claims that the population was continuing to grow at about 24 percent a year.

"Hopefully they'll go back to the drawing board and come up with a new plan that better protects wolves," said Earthjustice attorney Doug Honnold. Honnold had filed the lawsuit on behalf of a dozen environmental groups that argued wolves in the region remained in danger of extinction.

The decision to withdraw the recovery rule is subject to approval by the Department of Justice. Molloy also would have to sign off before it could take effect.

Justice Department Kristen Gustafson confirmed that she had telephoned the parties in the lawsuit on Tuesday, to gauge their position on a withdrawal of the government's rule. She declined to provide additional details.

In his July injunction against the planned hunts, Judge Molloy raised concerns about whether genetic exchange between wolves — through breeding — was adequate to ensure their continued recovery. If not enough exchange between different populations of wolves is taking place, as one study indicated, wolves could suffer from inbreeding.

Molloy also questioned Wyoming's lack of regulations on the killing of wolves across most of the state. Outside Yellowstone National Park and adjacent areas, wolves are classified as predators under Wyoming law, allowing them to be shot on sight.

In his injunction ruling, the judge accused the Fish and Wildlife Service of having "flip-flopped without explanation" in accepting Wyoming's wolf management plan after saying in 2004 that it was inadequate.

Jim Magagna, executive vice president of the Wyoming Stockgrowers Association, said he feared a withdrawal of the recovery ruling would force Wyoming to revise how it manages wolves. His group intervened in the federal lawsuit on the side of the government and the three states.

"My fear and my real concern is that they will withdraw that decision and then put pressure on the state of Wyoming to change our wolf management plan," he said.

Bangs, coordinator for the government's Northern Rockies wolf recovery program, said he still believes there are enough wolves to merit public hunting. But he said the government had failed to explain its reasoning, and that Molloy's concerns would have to be addressed before the government can return with a new proposal to remove federal protections.

"This means you do away with the de-listing rule and give it back to the Fish and Wildlife Service to think about more," he said. "There's

going to be a thorough, fine-toothed comb going through it to decide what we can do better.”

A representative of a group that has pushed to allow hunting of wolves said Tuesday that the government was bowing too quickly to the environmentalists' demands.

“As we have been predicting for years, they just rolled over,” said Robert Fanning with Friends of the Northern Yellowstone Elk Herd, another intervener in the federal lawsuit.

A summer wolf population count released Monday showed 1,455 of the animals in Montana, Wyoming and Idaho. That's down 90 wolves from last year and defies prior government claims of 2,000 wolves in the region.

The same report also showed instances of wolves preying on livestock on the rise, with 411 cattle and sheep killed in the first half of 2008, versus 296 through the same period last year.

In response, 172 wolves were killed by state and federal wildlife agents and private citizens defending their property. That's up from 134 at the same point last year.

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AP Writer Matt Joyce in Cheyenne contributed to this story.

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