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Wolverine advocates give notice of intent to sue

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HELENA, Mont. -- The federal government's refusal to protect wolverines under the Endangered Species Act will be challenged in a lawsuit if the decision is not reversed within 60 days, a coalition of nine groups said Tuesday.

Climate change compounds threats faced by wolverines and they are on the "precipice of extinction in the contiguous United States," the environmental groups said in their notice of intent to sue, sent to Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director H. Dale Hall.

Wolverines, which resemble small bears, are in the weasel family and are seen rarely. The Fish and Wildlife Service has estimated the U.S. wolverine population outside of Alaska consists of some 500 animals in Montana, Idaho, Washington and Wyoming, a figure the groups question.

The service said in March that even if they disappeared from the lower 48 states, wolverines would survive because those in the United States are connected to larger populations in Canada. There, the number of wolverines has been estimated at 15,000 to 19,000.

The service, part of the Interior Department, is "outsourcing" wildlife protection, said David Gaillard of Defenders of Wildlife, one of the nine environmental groups. "This policy essentially tells our children and grandchildren to go to Alaska or Canada to see wildlife," said Tim Preso of Earthjustice, the environmental law firm representing the groups.

They said wolverines in the United States and those in Canada are genetically separate. That is disputed by the Fish and Wildlife Service.

Agency spokeswoman Diane Katzenberger said Tuesday that officials had not seen the notice of intent to sue and have a policy of not commenting on pending litigation.

She said a "threats analysis" did not support Endangered Species Act protection for wolverines.

"The finding was that the U.S. population does not significantly contribute to the overall viability of the North American population," Katzenberger said.

Many wolverines were killed during an early 20th century poisoning campaign against wolves and other large predators in the United States.

In addition to climate change and its effect on the snowpack that wolverines need for maternal denning, modern-day risks to the animals include unregulated use of snowmobiles; helicopter skiing; and Montana trapping, says the letter giving Kempthorne and Hall the mandatory 60-day notice of intent to sue.

Apart from Alaska, Montana is the one state that allows wolverines to be trapped, said Gaillard, who last month asked state wildlife commissioners to reverse that policy. They refused and set a tentative trapping quota of nine wolverines for the coming season, down from the existing 10. Conservatively, Montana's population has been estimated at 200 wolverines, said wildlife managers in the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks.

Besides Defenders of Wildlife, the letter was on behalf of the Center for Biological Diversity, Conservation Northwest, Friends of the Clearwater, Greater Yellowstone Coalition, Idaho Conservation League, Jackson Hole Conservation Alliance, Klamath-Siskiyou Wildlands Alliance and Wyoming Outdoor Council.