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Feds push to end wolf protections

by Rocky Barker
The Idaho Statesman

BOISE, Idaho — Federal wildlife managers hope to remove wolves from the endangered species list in Idaho and Montana before President-elect Obama takes office.

But environmentalists say a decision before President Bush leaves office simply will delay final resolution by throwing the dispute back into the courts. They say the best course is to take modest interim steps now and then let the Obama administration take a fresh look at wolf management nationwide next year.

Either way, a new administration more favorable to environmentalists will inherit the job of sorting out a controversy that has raged since the 1980s.

The Bush administration is moving forward with plans nonetheless.

Ed Bangs, wolf-recovery coordinator for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, said this week that his agency will analyze comments on the administration's proposed wolf-management plan, which were due today.

"I'm hoping we can get to a final rule by the end of the year," Bangs said.

In March, wolves were removed from the protections of the endangered species list in Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, eastern Oregon, eastern Washington and northern Utah. That action gave primary responsibility for managing the animals

to the states, which proposed to loosen conditions under which wolves could be killed and to allow hunting. Environmentalists challenged that action, and a federal judge in Montana stopped the delisting in July, placing the predators back on the endangered species list.

U.S. District Judge Donald Molloy in Missoula, Mont., said the delisting plan was flawed because wolves were allowed to be killed on sight year-round in 90 percent of Wyoming.

In October, the federal government offered a new proposal to remove the animals from Endangered Species Act protection; the comment period on that plan is ending now. Federal officials did not reveal how the new plan would differ from the one that Molloy rejected. Instead, they asked the public to comment on a set of questions aimed at Molloy's objections.

Wyoming Gov. Dave Freudenthal's office said this week that Wyoming believes the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service wants to end federal wolf protections in Idaho and Montana, while leaving them in place in Wyoming. But if the agency takes that route, environmentalists say they are confident the proposal won't stand up in court.

"The problem with that is the Endangered Species Act doesn't let it delist a portion of its species if it is still is endangered across a significant part of its range," said Louisa Willcox of the Natural Resources Defense Council in Bozeman, Mont.

She and other wolf advocates want instead

for the agency to back off its delisting plan, work with Wyoming to bring its protections up to the levels of the other states, and increase efforts to persuade ranchers to use nonlethal methods to keep wolves from eating livestock.

She and other environmentalists will urge Obama's administration to write a national wolf recovery plan that resolves some of the legal hurdles the agency has had nationwide protecting wolves.

But federal and state wildlife officials, pushed by impatient ranchers and hunters, hope to return control over wolves to the states, which traditionally manage wildlife. The new delisting effort is aimed specifically at Molloy's objections to the first plan.

Molloy said he agreed with the claims of the 11 environmental groups that filed a lawsuit.

They argued that wolves in Yellowstone National Park were not genetically mixing with other wolf populations, as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said was necessary.

If the wolves don't interbreed throughout the region, that could leave isolated and genetically threatened enclaves, not a sustainable population. Bangs has said his agency's research and scientific documentation shows that the populations are mixing genetically.

The judge also said in his ruling that the wolf plans proposed by state wildlife

managers in Montana and Idaho were as good as or better than the previous federal rules. Still, Idaho Department of Fish and Game officials have sought to demonstrate to Molloy that their plan for managing the 800 wolves in the state is conservative, said Fish and Game Wildlife Bureau Chief Jim Unsworth.

“We’ve put in a little more explanation about how our hunting season will function in the first years and subsequent years,” Unsworth said.

Opponents have sought to depict Idaho’s wolf-hunting goals as excessive, he said.

But the Idaho Fish and Game Commission said its rules would not let wolf numbers drop below 520 wolves, five times the minimum number set by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

“The idea is to have a sustainable wolf population we can hunt,” Unsworth said.

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