



Arizona Daily Star

Monday, August 6, 2010

Efforts grow to kill, control wolf numbers

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The Associated Press

BILLINGS, Mont. - Government agencies are seeking broad new authority to ramp up killings and removals of gray wolves in the northern Rockies and Great Lakes, despite two recent court actions that restored the animal's endangered status in every state except Alaska and Minnesota.

Various proposals would gas pups in their dens, surgically sterilize adult wolves and allow "conservation" or "research" hunts to drive down the predators' numbers.

Once poisoned to near-extirmination in the lower 48 states, wolves made a remarkable comeback over the last two decades under protection of the Endangered Species Act. But as packs continue to multiply, their taste for livestock and big-game herds coveted by hunters has stoked a rising backlash.

Wildlife officials say that without public wolf hunting, they need greater latitude to eliminate problem packs.

Montana and Idaho held inaugural hunts last year, but an August court ruling scuttled their plans for 2010.

"As the wolf populations increase, the depredations increase and the number of wolf removals will increase. It's very logical," said Mark Collinge, Idaho director for Wildlife Services, the U.S. Department of Agriculture branch that removes problem wolves, typically by shooting them from aircraft.

"You just have to accept that part of having wolves is having to kill wolves," he said.

But wildlife advocates and animal rights groups contend the response to



Under the Endangered Species Act, wolves have made a significant comeback in many Northern states. But hunters and some U.S. officials now say they need wider latitude to control problem packs. (US Fish and Wildlife Service)

depredating wolves has become too heavy-handed. They say a string of court decisions in their favor underscores that the species remains at risk.

"The draconian lengths they are poised to take really are a throwback, to when the same agency was gassing wolf pups in their dens almost a century ago and setting poisoned baits and trapping them," said Michael Robinson with the Center for Biological Diversity.

At least 1,700 wolves now roam Idaho, Montana and Wyoming. There are more than 4,000 in Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota. New populations are taking hold in Oregon and Washington, and

wolves have been sighted in Colorado, Utah and New England.

Some of the most remote wilderness habitats are becoming saturated with the animals. As a result, packs are pushing into agricultural and residential areas.

One of the more extreme proposals - burying wolf pups in their dens and then poisoning them with carbon monoxide gas - would be used only infrequently, in cases where the rest of the pack had been killed for preying on livestock, officials said.

More established practices, including shooting wolves from the air and ground, would be expanded.

In Montana and Idaho, officials hope to revive hunting seasons by rebranding them as "conservation hunts" or "research hunts."

A novel, nonlethal approach to wolf control is being considered in Idaho, according to a Department of Agriculture proposal. After being surgically sterilized, pairs of wolves would be radio-collared and released - "to maintain and defend their territory against other wolf packs that might be more likely to prey on livestock."

THE ARIZONA ANGLE

Twelve years after Mexican gray wolves were reintroduced in Eastern Arizona, their dwindling numbers are putting the population "at risk of failure," said a report this year by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Factors such as the rigid borders of the endangered wolves' recovery area, removal of wolves to protect livestock, and illegal shooting of wolves are keeping the only wild population of Mexican gray wolves from growing, the report said.