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## Gray wolf back on protect list in Mont. and Idaho, to ranchers and hunters ire

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**T**he gray wolf will be protected again in Montana and Idaho, much to the ire of ranchers and hunters who say the animals kill too much livestock and game.

A federal judge ruled last week to list gray wolves under the Endangered Species Act, saying that the Northern Rockies wolves must all be treated as a single population. In other words, if the animals are considered endangered in one state, they must be listed as endangered throughout the region.

Opponents of the listing are directing their anger at Wyoming.

That's because Wyoming law allows the unregulated hunting of wolves throughout most of the state if they are taken off the endangered list. So while the federal government delisted wolves in Montana and Idaho last year after those states agreed to management plans that included controlled wolf hunts, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) kept Wyoming wolves on the endangered list.

"Unfortunately, we're not in a position to reward [Montana and Idaho] for their responsible behavior, because Wyoming is the outlier," said Tom Strickland, assistant interior secretary for fish, wildlife and parks.

Montana and Idaho officials, legislators and ranching groups say they will seek to reverse the ruling by U.S. District Judge Donald Molloy and will pressure Wyoming

to change its policy. A citizen committee that advises Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks has asked the agency to appeal the ruling. Agency spokesman Ron Aashiem said they are considering all options and will be meeting with federal, Idaho and Wyoming officials.

"It's a real slap in the face for those states who have worked hard to not only meet but exceed the goals" for wolf recovery, said Carl Ellsworth, a rancher and president of the Idaho Cattle Association.

But the Wyoming wildlife agency and Gov. Dave Freudenthal (D) say they don't plan to revise the state's wolf policy, which the federal listing overrides. Wyoming Game and Fish Department spokesman Eric Keszler said wolves should be considered "predators" that can be shot at will in the nine-tenths of the state that is largely agricultural land. If the wolf is delisted, hunting would be allowed but regulated in the remaining Wyoming land where, Keszler said, the majority of the state's 350 wolves live and should stay.

"They breed pretty prolifically," Keszler said. "When young wolves get older, they strike out and find new territory, and get into livestock areas where they have to

be removed."

In the early 1900s, wolves were nearly driven to extinction through trapping and hunting. By 1978, they were listed as endangered in the lower 48 states, except for Minnesota, where they were considered "threatened."

The federal government developed a recovery plan that included the reintroduction of wolves to the Northern Rockies in 1995 and 1996. By 2002, the Northern Rockies gray wolf population in Idaho, Montana and Wyoming had met the recovery goal of at least 30 breeding pairs and 300 wolves spread evenly over the three states. In 2007, Northern Rockies gray wolves were removed from the endangered species list.

But conservation groups sued over the delisting, and in 2008 Molloy



A federal judge last week ordered endangered species protection reinstated for the gray wolf in the Northern Rockies region. (Associated Press)

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ordered a preliminary injunction restoring protection. By last year, the area's wolf population reached more than 1,500, and Interior Secretary Ken Salazar approved the decision to remove wolves from the list in the Northern Rockies, with the exception of Wyoming.

Conservationists say if the endangered listing is removed, strong anti-wolf sentiment in the three states will mean policies that push the wolf populations back to the legally required minimum of 300.

"If the states were to take over and continue the recovery to a sustainable population, that would be fine," said Suzanne Stone, Northern Rockies representative for Defenders of Wildlife. "But the way things are now, that won't happen. They want to drive it down so the floor is also the ceiling."

A similar debate has been raging over gray wolf populations in the western Great Lakes region. As with the Northern Rockies wolves, this population was delisted in 2007 then relisted after litigation. Hunters and landowners have sued,

and Wisconsin and Minnesota state agencies have petitioned to remove wolves from the endangered and threatened species list. Minnesota wolves are considered threatened, while Michigan and Wisconsin wolves are deemed endangered.

Major environmental and conservation groups see Molloy's recent ruling as precedent-setting in a larger battle over how the Endangered Species Act is implemented. They say the act is meant to support the reestablishment of a species across its whole historic natural range. If a species is endangered in one location where it once thrived, they argue, it should be considered endangered throughout that region.

"What the agency [USFWS] has done is keep arbitrarily shrinking the zone of wolf protection down to the smallest possible circle," said Kieran Suckling, an attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity, among the groups that have sued to maintain the wolf's endangered listing.

But Aashiem said current wolf populations are "more than Montana residents can bear."

The number of cattle and sheep killed by wolves increased between 2006 and 2009, according to Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks. Last year, 97 cattle and 202 sheep were reported killed in Montana; in Idaho the number was 75 cattle and 324 sheep. Wolf supporters said the figures pale next to the numbers killed by coyotes, weather and other factors.

Errol Rice, executive vice president of the Montana Stockgrowers Association, said the weakening of livestock by the "harassment" of wolves also takes a serious toll, as herds under stress might not reproduce as often, and calves might not gain weight as quickly.

Bob Ream, a member of Montana's wildlife advisory commission, is a retired wildlife biology professor who has worked on the federal wolf recovery program. He thinks it's counterproductive to relist wolves as endangered.

"You have to ask the question, how many is enough?" he said. "There's no danger to wolf populations -- wolves are here to stay. I don't think any amount of hunting in Montana will eliminate them."