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Montana, Idaho and Wyoming Wolf Policies Foreshadow Extinction

The federal authorization for each state to reduce wolves to 100-150 animals puts northern Rockies wolves on a spiral toward extinction.

Guest Opinion: Wolves

By Michael J. Robinson

Recently concluded public wolf-hunting seasons along with federal predator-control killings resulted in the shootings of over 500 gray wolves in Montana and Idaho, leaving the combined wolf population in those two states and Wyoming at around 1,700 animals, close to what it was last year. Under state management future wolf mortality can be expected to climb significantly unless last April's removal of wolves from the endangered species list is overturned in federal court and federal protections are restored.

According to the wolf delisting rule that was promulgated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and is challenged in court by the Center for Biological Diversity and other conservation organizations represented by Earthjustice, the states of Idaho and Montana may reduce wolf numbers to 100-150 individual animals in each state. Idaho has been particularly adamant that it intends to drive wolf numbers as low as possible. Montana's open-ended authorization of predator-control actions will subject wolves to almost unlimited persecution. Wyoming's wolves, also subject to federal killing, are still on the endangered species list and thus not yet publicly hunted – but when delisting finally occurs in Wyoming, it too will be authorized to eliminate all but 100-150 wolves.

A northern Rocky Mountains wolf population eventually reduced to fewer than 500 animals may contain fewer than 100 breeding individuals, since only two wolves in each family pack reproduce. Scientists warn that hundreds, if not thousands, of breeding animals are necessary to prevent the genetic unraveling of any species, with attendant births of deformed animals, reductions in birth rates, and lower survival rates. The federal authorization for each state to reduce wolves to 100-150 animals puts northern Rockies wolves on a spiral toward extinction.

The Center for Biological Diversity has repeatedly called on the Service to conduct a population and habitat viability assessment for wolves in the region, to determine what number and distribution of wolves is necessary to ensure their long-term viability. However, the federal agency delisted wolves without conducting such a study.

The Yellowstone ecosystem has only 38 wolf breeding pairs and the continued existence of wolves in Yellowstone depends on connectivity to wolves in central Idaho. Last year the U.S. Department of Agriculture destroyed two entire wolf packs in the intervening habitat. Public wolf hunts may have aggravated the damage, further isolating the Yellowstone wolves.

Hunting wolves for sport, ideology, or livestock protection can prevent single male and female wolves from finding each other, and killing wolf parents can leave the pups to starve. Ironically, orphaned and inexperienced yearling wolves may be more likely to resort to killing livestock. Thus, it is not surprising that as wolf packs in central Idaho were gunned down last year, two young male wolves appeared in eastern Oregon, began killing livestock, and were then shot from the air by the Department of Agriculture.

We now have extensive knowledge about the link between the presence of wolves and ecosystem health. Wolves have been shown to benefit streamside vegetation by keeping elk on the move; the improved riparian habitat supports more songbirds, beavers, and fish. Wolves provide carrion for scavengers such as eagles, bears, and wolverines. And wolves boost pronghorn numbers by controlling coyotes, which disproportionately prey on newborn pronghorn.

These are precisely the types of benefits enshrined in the Endangered Species Act's first statement of purpose: "to provide a means whereby the ecosystems upon which endangered species and threatened species depend may be conserved." Yet federal predator control coupled with public wolf hunting ensures that wolves will only occupy a small portion of the northern Rocky Mountain states, denying most of the region's ecosystems these benefits. As the wolf killing programs gear up, the range of the wolf will shrink. Other western landscapes such as the southern Rocky Mountains and the Pacific Northwest which have few or no wolves, depend on migrants from the northern Rockies to restore their wolf populations and ecosystems – an increasingly unlikely prospect as the wolf range contracts.

The Center for Biological Diversity is seeking a court ruling overturning the wolf delisting rule and compelling the Fish and Wildlife Service to re-assess its arbitrary position that 300-450 wolves in three states will suffice to prevent the northern Rockies wolf population from going extinct. The Fish and Wildlife Service must develop a basis for long-term conservation of wolves and their ecosystems in the northern Rockies and throughout the United States. That's better public policy, and more lawful than managing a species that nearly went extinct once due to human persecution, via a new and ever-expanding body count.