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Environmentalists want wolves restored across more of U.S.

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By John Myers
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A national environmental group is asking the federal government to keep Endangered Species Act protections for wolves in the Great Lakes and Rocky Mountains until wolves have returned across much more of the U.S.

The Center for Biological Diversity filed a petition Tuesday with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service asking the agency to scrap efforts to end federal protections for wolves in regions where they have strong populations and instead form a national recovery plan for the big predator.

The petition cites scientific data that concludes gray wolves can and should be recovered in "multiple, connected populations throughout the U.S." before they can be considered truly recovered under the Endangered Species Act.

"The act requires that wolf populations be recovered across a significant portion of their original range, and that isn't close to happening as yet," Michael Robinson, conservation advocate for the Center for Biological Diversity, told the News Tribune. "We need a national wolf plan and policy."

The move is in direct opposition to efforts in Minnesota and Wisconsin to quickly eliminate federal wolf protections to allow states to manage their own wolves and to allow more wolf culling.

Rather than distinct populations

in the western Great Lakes and Rocky Mountains, which the federal government has concluded is enough to call wolf recovery successful, the center wants wolves back in places like Colorado, New England, the Pacific Northwest, the Great Basin, California and the Great Plains where few or no wolves currently roam.

If the Fish and Wildlife Service agrees with the petition, or is compelled to accept it under court order, the agency would have to entirely re-work its national wolf policy. That means the center's effort could delay indefinitely federal plans to hand management of wolves back to the states in areas where they have already rebounded — including Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan.

The feds have tried three times in the past decade to take Great Lakes wolves off the endangered species list. Each time they have been thwarted by court orders, most recently in 2009. Agency officials say they are again re-working plans to comply with federal court decisions.

State officials in Minnesota and Wisconsin, as well as hunting and farming groups in the two states, each filed formal petitions with the Fish and Wildlife Service this year asking for faster action to hand wolf management back to the state. So far, there has been no formal response.

"It's frustrating for us because we already have a strong, recovered population and shouldn't have to wait,"

said Adrian Wydeven, wolf expert for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. "But from what we are hearing, the Fish and Wildlife Service already is heading toward some sort of broader, national wolf policy... realizing that separating out (regional) distinct population segments hasn't made it very far in the courts."

Wolves were eliminated from 47 of the 48 contiguous states by the 1970's, holding on only in the Superior National Forest in Minnesota where they numbered fewer than 500. Since receiving federal protections in 1974, their numbers have increased to about 3,200 in Minnesota and nearly 700 each in Wisconsin and Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Populations also have been established in the northern Rocky Mountains.

Many groups say that's enough wolves to call wolf recovery an ecological success story and that it's time to move wolves off the federal list so other animals can be moved on. Some say wolf numbers need to be culled to prevent losses to livestock, pets and game animals such as deer.

