



# Wyoming wolf plan faces roadblocks

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CHEYENNE, Wyo. — Gov. Matt Mead said last week that his plan is to reach an agreement by summer with federal wildlife officials to remove Wyoming wolves from the federal endangered species list.

But even if that long-awaited hurdle is passed, there's another potential roadblock ahead: getting congressional approval to forestall inevitable court challenges.

Since wolves were reintroduced to Yellowstone National Park in the mid-1990s, Wyoming and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have clashed over what the state's wolf management plan should look like. State officials, as well as many ranchers and sportsmen, want to allow unregulated killing of the animals in all but the northeast corner of the state. Federal officials and environmental groups want wolves to be classified as "trophy game" throughout the state, meaning they could only be hunted with a license.

## Ongoing negotiations

Mead administration officials have been negotiating with Fish and Wildlife representatives since January to hammer out a compromise deal, which would then have to be approved by the Wyoming Legislature and the Obama administration.

But that wouldn't be the end of it: Mead and other state officials have repeatedly said that they want Congress to ratify the deal and, particularly, to insert a clause forbidding any judicial review of the agreement.

"The history on this has shown that people are very litigious and have strong feelings about it both ways," Mead told The Associated Press in March. "What we want to do is move us forward and get

us out from under these lawsuits. Get us to a plan where Wyoming could manage the wolves." It's uncertain how receptive Congress would be to such a deal, even though it passed a similar proposal last month to delist wolves in five other Western states.

That proposal was inserted into a must-pass budget bill by Montana's two Democratic U.S. senators, Max Baucus and Jon Tester.

While neither conservation groups nor proponents of Wyoming's wolf-management plan favored the rider, both sides said the deal set a precedent that could make it easier for a Wyoming agreement to make it through Congress.

## Good argument

"I think we could make a pretty good argument to Congress that you need to do the same thing for us," said Wyoming Stock Growers Association Vice President Jim Magagna, who supports Wyoming's current wolf management plan.

But others said the rider might make it harder in some ways for any Wyoming wolf plan to go through — especially if it's brought up using the same legislative tactics.

Adding the delisting language to a budget bill surprised and enraged many lawmakers and the environmental community, who are now on the alert for any new proposals brought before Congress to remove animals from the Endangered Species Act.

"I think a lot of the public was really disappointed to see that happen that way," said Derek Goldman, Montana's representative with the Western Wolf Coalition. "I don't think you'd find support for delisting as a rider or a stand-alone bill."

In addition, given Wyoming's staunch, none-too-subtle anti-wolf stance, conservation groups will likely be skeptical of any plan that the state approves — and outright against having Congress take away their most prominent weapon in the fight over wolves: litigation.

“The environmental community would be vociferously opposed to giving the state of Wyoming a blank check — which is what a lack of judicial enforcement is,” said Bill Snape, senior counsel at the Center For Biological Diversity. “I think to just trust Wyoming at this point would just be naïve and foolish.”

U.S. Sen. Mike Enzi, R-Wyo., who supports Wyoming's wolf management plan, said he saw “quite a bit of opposition to a no-litigation clause” when the appropriations rider was brought up last month.

And while Wyoming has in the past worked with state officials in Montana and Idaho to fight the feds on wolves, that collaboration may wane now that wolves in those states have been delisted.

“We don't have as much support, maybe, from these other states now for a Wyoming delisting because their needs have, at least on the surface, been taken care of,” Magagna said.

The biggest Capitol Hill allies of a Wyoming-approved wolf management plan will likely be Wyoming's congressional delegation.

“Our state's decision should be the final word — and protected immediately by Congress,” U.S. Sen. John Barrasso, R-Wyo., said in a media release. “I am continuing to work with other members of Congress to ensure that we take this action after an agreement is reached.”

U.S. Rep. Cynthia Lummis, R-Wyo., hasn't even waited for an agreement to be reached. She's introduced or co-sponsored several bills to put Wyoming wolves under state control.

## Unknowns

In the end, many observers said they didn't want to predict how Congress might receive a Wyoming wolf management plan. It would depend on what the plan's details are, as well as the timing of when federal lawmakers consider it.

“It is impossible to know what the political climate will be when the issue may come before Congress,” Enzi spokeswoman Elly Pickett said in a media release.

Of course, the whole debate will remain purely hypothetical until an agreement can be reached between Wyoming and Fish and Wildlife — a goal that still remains unreached after years of negotiations.

“We've got to get there first,” Magagna said