

## Gray wolf numbers in decline in Northern Rockies



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A new government report shows gray wolf populations in the Northern Rockies declined in 2010, due largely to aerial shooting and federal trappings against the endangered species that a conservation group calls “heavy-handed.”

“The decline in wolf numbers reflects heavy-handed federal management even as wolves remain on the endangered species list,” said Michael Robinson of the Center for Biological Diversity (CBD) in a news release. “Despite the decline in numbers, some members in Congress are intent on stripping away their federal protections, even if it means doing so by attaching riders to a must-pass spending bill,” he added.

Federal records (pdf) released on Friday show a decline of gray wolf populations from 1,733 in 2009 to 1,651 in 2010. The populations range through the Northern Rocky Mountain region, including Wyoming, Montana, Idaho, Washington and Oregon. According to the CBD, federal trapping and aerial gunning programs killed 260 wolves in 2010.

In 2009 to 2010 comparisons, wolf numbers in Idaho saw the largest decrease, from 870 to 705 animals, and were the sole contributor to the regional decline. Small population growths occurred in Montana (524 to 566) and Wyoming (320 to 343). Washington and Oregon gray wolf numbers increased as well, from 19 to 37, including three breeding pairs.

Gray wolves were taken off the endangered species list on May 4, 2009, but a federal court order in a case brought by an alliance of conservation groups, including the CBD, put them back on the list in August 2010.

However, new legislation introduced in the 112th Congress would remove protection for the gray wolves and their delisting would open up a shoot-on-sight policy across 90 percent of Wyoming, and other states in the Northern Rockies would be allowed to drastically reduce wolf populations.

The legislation has been attached as a rider to spending bill proposals. The House last month passed its version of the spending bill that included other “anti-environment riders,” according to the CBD. The Senate’s version of the spending bill includes similar measures and awaits approval.

Last week, a coalition of 48 conservation groups sent a letter (pdf) to Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-CA) asking her to exercise her power as chair of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee for stopping legislation that removes protection of gray wolves by the Endangered Species Act, noting that in order to “ensure continued recovery of wolves, it is vital that we keep in place legal safeguards to protect the wolf and make science-based management decisions.”

“Decisions about the fate of the nation’s imperiled wildlife should be made by scientists, not politicians,” said Noah Greenwald, director for endangered species at the CBD, in a press release. “It would set a terrible precedent if Congress began removing protections for species one at a time,” he continued.