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NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

Conservation group seeks U.S. gray wolf strategy

- Kelly Zito, Chronicle Staff Writer

More than 80 years after the last wild wolf in California was captured in Lassen County, a conservation group wants the federal government to reinstate the species in the Golden State and other areas where they ranged historically.

The gray wolf is already making a comeback in the Southwest, the Great Lakes region and the northern Rocky Mountains, where the federal government manages their recovery in three separate programs.

But the Center for Biological Diversity says the Department of the Interior's plans cover only a small fraction of the canine's former range, and it wants the government to draw up a national strategy for the lower 48 states.

With a thriving gray wolf population spilling over from the Rockies into Washington and Oregon, biologists say it is only a matter of time before packs of the extremely adaptable carnivores wander into California.

But without a plan, the wolves would be vulnerable to the kind of systematic destruction that extirpated them from most of the United States in the centuries that followed European settlement, conservationists say.

'Recovery hampered'

"The Department of the Interior's failure to develop a national recovery strategy for the wolf, as it has for other species like the bald eagle, has led to tremendous confusion and hampered true wolf recovery," said Noah Greenwald, endangered



species program director with the group in Portland, Ore. "Wolves have been an integral part of North American landscapes for millions of years and are cherished, iconic animals that deserve a certain future in this country."

Greenwald's organization filed notice last week of its plan to sue the Department of the Interior within two months unless the agency crafts a program to extend the country's wolf populations beyond several isolated pockets. The group identified "suitable habitats" in several Western regions, including the Pacific Northwest, southern Rocky Mountains and California. Siskiyou, Trinity and Modoc counties are the most likely candidates, based on their relatively sparse human populations and the presence of prey animals.

Wolf restoration has been fraught with so much controversy since a 1990s reintroduction program in Yellowstone National Park, however, that any effort in California or beyond is probably many years down the road. Federal and state wildlife regulators are loath even to discuss the topic. In 1995, gray wolves were returned to Yellowstone with the goal of establishing a population of about 300. The species rebounded more quickly than anticipated, and the northern Rockies are now home to roughly 1,700 wolves.

That has put many hunters and ranchers in Idaho, Montana and Wyoming on the defensive and prompted several requests for the wolf to be taken off the endangered species list. Hunting wolves has been illegal since they were added to the list in 1973. Each attempt to remove the protections has been challenged by environmental groups and blocked in a series of federal court rulings.

Biologists estimate that there were once as many as 2 million wolves across what is now the continental United States. But as settlers pushed farther West, they poisoned, trapped and hunted wolves, bears, mountain lions and other large carnivores to clear the land for crops, sheep, cattle and other grazers. Wolves have remained plentiful in Alaska, however. Depending on the subspecies and locations, U.S. wolves weigh between 50 and 150 pounds. In the wild, they hunt in packs mainly for deer, elk, caribou, bison and other hoofed creatures.

None wild in California

Today, there are several thousand gray wolves in the lower 48 states, including populations in the Great Lakes region, and in Arizona and

New Mexico. In California, the only surviving wolves reside in zoos or sanctuaries, including 22 specimens at the California Wolf Center outside San Diego.

Some like it that way. This month, eight Republican members of Congress, including Rep. Wally Herger, R-Chico, sponsored a bill that would remove gray wolves from the protected list and turn over regulation of the species to individual states. Herger and the others worry that any future effort to reintroduce the wolves to their districts would severely restrict land use and decimate livestock and big game animals.

But those who study and defend wolves point out that large carnivores are a key ecological link. Studies in Yellowstone show that wolves disperse elk, which helps revive streamside vegetation that offers habitat for songbirds and beavers, Greenwald said. They also tamp down coyote populations, allowing pronghorns and foxes to flourish.

“That’s why the Endangered Species Act was passed,” said Erin Hunt, general manager of the California Wolf Center. “You can’t remove a top predator from the food system without having huge effects downstream, from the largest mammals to plants and the smallest organisms.”