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Idaho Wolf Management Off the Rails

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By Idaho standards, it was big news this week when Idaho Gov. Butch Otter approved the state's first-ever felony animal cruelty law for pets and livestock, leaving the Dakotas as the only states without similar laws.

But even animal rights activists in Idaho were hardly pulling out the champagne. At the same time Otter was signing the bill that many believe too weak to actually improve the treatment of domestic animals, Idaho state game officials were trying to explain why they failed to use existing laws on the humane treatment of trapped wild animals to charge a trapper who took time to pose, grinning, in the blood-stained snow next to a wounded, but still very much alive wolf.

The wolf had likely been ensnared in the trap for hours, if not days, but trapper Josh Bransford thought it was fine that he take time to crouch beside the bloody, frightened animal for a photo op. And apparently, so do state officials, who at best conducted a fly-by investigation of the incident before throwing up their hands.

This is only the latest proof that Idaho has absolutely no interest in managing a wolf population whose Endangered Species Act protections were prematurely stripped a year ago this week by a last-second rider attached to a budget bill in Congress.

Since then, wolf management in Idaho appears to have reverted to the days when wolves were viewed as little more than vermin and unwelcome on the landscape -- the same attitude that nearly drove them extinct.

Idaho's 2009 wolf management plan called for managing wolves above 500 individuals in 15 packs, but the state has not set a maximum number of wolves that

can be killed and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will only reconsider federal protection when the number of wolves drops below a paltry 150 wolves.

To date, hunting and trapping have taken 376 of the roughly 1,000 wolves roaming the state, or more than a third of the population, in one season. And the hunt is still open in parts of the state. The Department of Fish and Game's handling of the Bransford incident, coupled with their excessively liberal hunting rules, makes it clear Idaho's goal is to manage wolves back to the brink of extinction and offers a lens on why wolves, and other top predators, will only survive with federal protection.

The evidence to date is pretty clear: The congressional rider delisting wolves in Idaho not only ignored the scientific and on-the-ground realities of effectively managing fragile wolf populations, it failed to take into account whether Idaho has the ability to manage the complex factors surrounding the re-introduction of wolves. All the facts suggest state officials have neither the ability nor the interest.

Wolves in Idaho deserve better. After being nearly wiped out of the West, it's taken a national effort to return these incredible predators to the landscape. Wolf recovery is a landmark achievement of the Endangered Species Act but it's too early to declare victory, especially with what we've seen in Idaho the last 12 months. If Idaho and other states aren't up to the task to responsibly managing these nationally important species -- and it's pretty clear at the moment they're not -- it's time to return their protections under the Endangered Species Act.