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## America's Wolves Don't Deserve This

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The Obama administration is giving up on America's wolves.

On Friday morning, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced its plans to strip Endangered Species Act protections for wolves across most of the lower 48 states.

This decision, if enacted, prematurely ends one of the most important wildlife recovery stories in America's history.

Wolves today occupy just 5 percent of their historic habitat in the continental United States. Apparently that 5 percent is enough for the Obama administration to declare victory and walk away.

Many of the nation's top wolf scientists disagree. They have criticized the wildlife agency for misrepresenting their research and failing to rely on the best scientific evidence on wolf recovery.

This proposal severely limits any chance wolves will ever return to hundreds of square miles of prime wolf habitat in places like the wilds of the Pacific Northwest, California, the southern Rocky Mountains or the Northeast. These are places far from people and with plentiful prey to support them - places where healthy populations of wolves can survive and thrive.

Decades ago the federal government made a commitment to save and recover wolves, recognizing the ecological importance of these top predators. We also recognized that we have a moral obligation to help these animals that, for decades, were the victim of ruthless government programs to drive them off the landscape.

Prematurely stripping federal protections for wolves across most of the lower 48 will certainly raise the risk that they'll be increasingly shot and trapped.

In the northern Rocky Mountains, more than 1,100 wolves have been killed since protections were removed in 2011 and this year populations declined by 7 percent.

There's no reason to expect this type of killing won't continue once nearly all wolves in the continental United States lose their protections.

And by letting that happen, we'll be foreclosing on the possibility that wolves can, at some point, return to many of their ancestral lands in mountains, forest, valleys and plains. Left alone to do their job, wolves sustain a critical natural balance in those places, whether it's keeping deer and coyote populations in check or keeping elk and other prey species on the move so they don't devour and trample streamsides that songbirds and beavers need to survive.

Wolves deserve a chance to return to the American landscape. They will never be as abundant as they once were across North America, and nobody expects that. But restoring them to just 5 percent of where they once lived, then calling it quits and hunting them down again by the thousands? That's just wrong.

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