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U.S. plans to drop gray wolves from endangered list

By Julie Cart, Los Angeles Times
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The planned ruling would eliminate protection for the top predators, but scientists and conservationists say the proposal is flawed.



Graphic: Gray wolves' history and recovery

Federal authorities intend to remove endangered species protections for all gray wolves in the Lower 48 states, carving out an exception for a small pocket of about 75 Mexican wolves in the wild in Arizona and New Mexico, according to a draft document obtained by The Times.

The sweeping rule by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service would eliminate protection for wolves 18 years after the government reestablished the predators in the West,



The gray wolf was reintroduced to Yellowstone National Park in 1995. More than 1,600 now roam the northern Rockies. (Yellowstone National Park)

where they had been hunted to extinction. Their reintroduction was a success, with the population growing to the thousands.

But their presence has always drawn protests across the Intermountain West from state officials, hunters and ranchers who lost livestock to the wolves. They have lobbied to remove the gray wolf from the endangered list.

Once those protections end, the fate of wolves is left to individual states. The species is only beginning to recover

in Northern California and the Pacific Northwest. California is considering imposing its own protections after the discovery of a lone male that wandered into the state's northern counties from Oregon two years ago.

The species has flourished elsewhere, however, and the government ended endangered status for the gray wolf in the northern Rockies and Great Lakes regions last year.

Mike Jimenez, who manages wolves in the northern Rockies for the Fish and Wildlife Service, said delisting in that region underscored a "huge success story." He said that while wolves are now legally hunted in Montana, Idaho and Wyoming, the federal agency continues to monitor pack populations and can reinstate protections should numbers reach levels that biologists consider to be dangerously low.

Scientists and conservationists who reviewed the plan said its reasoning is flawed. They challenged how the agency reconfigures the classification of wolf subspecies and its assertion that little habitat remains for wolves.

Jamie Rappaport Clark, the former director of the Fish and Wildlife Service and now the president of Defenders of Wildlife, said the decision "reeks of politics" and vowed that it will face multiple legal challenges.

"This is politics versus professional wildlife management," Clark said. "The service is saying, 'We're done. Game over. Whatever happens to wolves in the U.S. is a state thing.' They are declaring victory long before science would tell them to do so."

The Fish and Wildlife Service is expected to release its decision to delist the wolves in

coming weeks and it could become final within a year. Brent Lawrence, a Fish and Wildlife Service spokesman, said Thursday that the agency would not comment.

The proposed rule is technically a draft until it is entered into the Federal Register.

Some scientists agreed with the decision to delist the wolves. But several took exception to some of the findings that the agency included in the document, including the scientifically disputed issue of defining wolf subspecies.

"It's a little depressing that science can be used and pitched in this way," said Bob Wayne, a professor of evolutionary biology at UCLA.

Wolves were once common and ranged across much of the continental United States, a vestigial symbol of the Old West and its expanse of open, wild country.

But as the West became urbanized and ranching spread, government-subsidized hunting that offered bounties for wolf kills virtually wiped out the animals by the 1930s.

A half-century later, scientists recognized the value in restoring top predators to re-balance ecosystems, and federal wildlife managers hashed out a reintroduction program. A group of 66 Canadian wolves were reintroduced to Yellowstone National Park in 1995 and the animals have thrived, exceeding recovery goals each year. More than 1,600 now roam the northern Rockies, although last year the population fell by 7%.

Wolves and their presence on the landscape have always elicited passionate responses and stirred political action. In 2011, for example, language that Congress buried in a defense ap-

appropriations bill directed the Interior secretary to remove most wolves in the Rockies from the endangered classification. Such decisions are normally left to the Fish and Wildlife Service.

Delisting is not common, and is generally accompanied by much fanfare as the move signifies a great effort in pulling a species back from the brink of extinction. Only two dozen species have ever been removed from the list.

Michael Robinson of the Center for Biological Diversity has been tracking the progress of Mexican wolves and applauded the decision to designate that species as endangered.

“The importance of a subspecies listing is that it will finally compel the service to do what it says it’s wanted to do for 25 years — which is to complete a recovery plan,” he said.

The recognition of the Mexican gray wolf as a subspecies represents an about-face for the agency. The Fish and Wildlife Service denied a listing petition for the Mexican wolf in October.

The Mexican wolf reintroduction program, begun in 1995, has been a disaster. Only one wolf has been released from the captive breeding program in the last four years — in January. That male was recaptured three weeks later.