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Guest: Don't roll back federal protections for wolves



By Amaroq Weiss

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Don't let the government remove Endangered Species Act protections for wolves in the Lower 48 states, argues guest columnist Amaroq Weiss.

Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife

A survey shows that most Washingtonians want wolves protected.

AS Washington state lawmakers and wildlife managers fine-tune the state's wolf conservation and management plan, they need only look to the nation's capital for some tips on what not to do.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is considering dropping Endangered Species Act protections for wolves across most of the Lower 48 states even though wolves have recovered to only a fraction of their past range and numbers. Wolves face aggressive hunting and trapping in all of the states where protections have already been removed.

The anti-wolf policies in our nation's capital and many western states stand in sharp contrast to what most voters and top wolf scientists are calling for.

A 2011 Colorado State University report showed that 3 in 4 Washington residents wanted wolves protected. Across the nation, almost 2 out of 3 people surveyed opposed federal plans to drop protections for wolves, according to a report by Public Policy Polling this summer.

The nation's leading wolf researchers concur that wolves need continued protection to sustain the recovery of a genetically robust population.

Yet there's mounting evidence that bureaucrats in the nation's capital have been actively working to muzzle some of those scientists. Earlier this month the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service excluded three wolf researchers from participating in the scientific peer-review of the proposal to drop federal protections for wolves in the continental U.S.

The scientists were excluded because they signed a letter calling out the service for mischaracterizing the scientists' own research to justify dropping federal wolf protections. After public outcry, the agency backtracked.

Wildlife managers in Washington have lots of evidence about what Washingtonians want and what scientists think.

Over a five-year period, Washington residents funded and participated in a broad collaborative effort to develop the Washington's Wolf Conservation and Management Plan, which was enacted in 2011.

The compromise plan underwent careful review by 43 scientists and more than 65,000 members of the public commented.

It is now up to the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, with oversight by Gov. Jay Inslee, to ensure that Washington's wolf plan is faithfully implemented with the best interest of wolves in mind.

Last year the department authorized killing the entire Wedge Pack in response to livestock depredations in Eastern Washington. These wolves were killed though the rancher who lost cattle was using risky husbandry practices that involved spreading a small breed of cattle over a large area of public lands with known wolf activity.

The state Fish & Wildlife should not be in the business of killing wolves to benefit ranchers who do not use proven methods to protect their cattle.

The state department also recently enacted an emergency rule that allows permitless killing of wolves caught in the act of attacking livestock.

Like the authorization to kill the Wedge Pack wolves, such a rule has the potential to provide incentives to those ranchers with long-standing anti-wolf biases to do even less to avoid conflicts with wolves in order to see them killed.

Whether Washington's wolves, and those across most of the continental U.S., will once again be pushed to the brink of extinction, is yet to be seen.

What's clear is this: Politicians and bureaucrats considering critical wolf-management decisions are more than willing to ignore the facts and broad public opinion whenever the voters tolerate it.

And when it comes to the future of our wolves, there's never been a better time than right now for Washingtonians to speak up.

Public-comment periods are under way on both the federal plan to delist wolves and on new Washington state proposals on wolf management.