

# The Salt Lake Tribune

## Commentary:

### A raw deal for one of the Rockies' fiercest citizens



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Fierce, cunning and built for survival on unforgiving mountain landscapes, wolverines can rip apart frozen carcasses and have been known to chase away grizzlies.

But wolverines are caught up in a fight even they may not walk away from.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service last week overruled the recommendations of its own scientists and withdrew a proposal to protect them un-

der the Endangered Species Act. The decision stands to have tragic consequences for one of the rarest mammals in the lower 48.

Today, there are fewer than 300 wolverines occupying a fraction of their historic range in the continental United States, most of them in the northern Rockies, including at least one in Utah. Prior to decades of trapping and poisoning, wolverines once also occurred throughout the southern Rockies, Cascades and Sierra Nevada.

Now, global warming is melting the spring snowpack wolverines need to build dens and raise their young. Federal scientists say that, over the next 75 years, warming temperatures could rob wolverines of 63 percent of their snowy habitat.

It's not hard to imagine what that will do to an animal whose numbers are already precariously low.

In February 2013, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposed Endangered Species Act protection for wolverines, saying the warming

climate is "threatening the species with extinction." The proposal won strong support from five of seven scientific peer reviewers.

After several states, including Utah, objected to the proposal, the service took the unusual step of convening an independent panel of nine scientists to review it. The panel confirmed the conclusions of the agency's scientists and unanimously concluded the wolverine's future does not look promising. The assistant director for the service's Rocky Mountain region then recommended finalizing protection.

That all changed on May 30, when Noreen Walsh, director of the agency's Rocky Mountain Region, sent out an internal memo ordering federal scientists to reverse course.

Had some new science come to light casting doubt on the science underpinning the need to protect wolverines? No. Instead, Walsh was relying on her own opinion over uncertainties in modeling studies used in making the decision.