

San Jose Mercury News

Wolves:

California needs to help save endangered species

By Amaroq Weiss
Special to the Mercury News
November 11, 2013

In the months since the wolf known as OR-7 slipped quietly out of California following a stay of more than a year, state officials have been working to complete their review of whether to award state protections to gray wolves.

The word out of Sacramento this week is that a preliminary state study undergoing peer review tries to make a case against protecting wolves. In fact, OR-7's historic 500-mile journey from Oregon to California makes a very strong case for why wolves need protecting here, offering on-the-ground proof of what top researchers have said for decades: Recovering populations will return to California's thousands of acres of prime, upland wolf habitat.

The question is, will California be prepared to manage them when they get here?

It's a question taking on new urgency as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service rolls into California on Friday for a public hearing on the Obama administration's proposal to strip most wolves in the lower 48 states of Endangered Species Act protections.

If the Service follows through, wolf recovery will be left almost entirely to the states.

Already we're seeing how that's likely to work out for wolves. In the northern Rockies and Great Lakes regions, where wolves lost federal protection over the past two years, more than 2,200 have already been killed in state-sanctioned hunts.

Shortly after OR-7 arrived, it became clear the sentiments driving those hunts are shared by some Californians. In the Klamath-Siskiyou and Modoc plateau regions that are home to many of California's 6 million head of livestock, cattlemen and some elected officials didn't hold back on the vitriol, according to news reports.

"We would like to see them shot on sight," said the chair of the Siskiyou County Board of Supervisors as OR-7 first approached the California state line in December 2011.

"If I see a wolf," said a Modoc County supervisor a month later, "it's dead."

OR-7 was lucky to get out of California alive. Like fledgling populations in Oregon and Washington, wolves returning to California will need state protection to survive.

In California, historically a leader in conservation issues, the evidence has always suggested most voters support the return of wolves. During the two-month comment period that followed the state fish and wildlife recommendation that gray wolves be considered for state protection, the state received some 7,000 letters in favor, and only 33 in opposition.

A national poll conducted earlier this year found that only 1 in 3 voters favored the Obama administration's plan to drop federal protections for wolves, while a majority supported returning wolves to prime habitat in the Rockies, Northeast, Pacific Northwest and California.

The politically driven federal delisting proposal is premature, unsupported by the best available science. It fails to ensure wolves have been recovered to significant portions of their historic range. Nowhere is that more evident than here on the West Coast, where wolves are just starting to make a comeback. With only about 100 wolves in Washington and Oregon, they can hardly be considered recovered.

Scientists have identified more than 145,000 square miles across Washington, Oregon and California capable of supporting around 1,700 wolves. But OR-7's test-drive through Northern California was a timely reminder that without state protection, the return of wolves is likely to be a sad, short-lived chapter with a violent end.

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