



Proposal to stop protecting gray wolf stirs controversy

Environmentalists are protesting an Obama administration proposal to remove the gray wolf from the endangered species list, but officials say the wolf is no longer at risk.

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. Obama administration has proposed removing the gray wolf from the endangered species list

. Environmentalists say it is too early to take protections away

. Some ranchers fear that wolves could kill their livestock

WASHINGTON — The Obama administration's proposal to remove the gray wolf from the federal endangered species list



This undated image provided by Yellowstone National Park shows a gray wolf in the wild. (Photo: MacNeill Lyons, AP)

is prompting howls of protest from environmentalists and congressional Democrats and has given ranchers, hunters and Republican lawmakers reason to cheer.

Other Americans can also weigh in. People have until Dec. 17 to tell the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service what they think about the proposed rule to lift federal protections for the gray wolf in much of the continental United States.

The Mexican wolf, found only in the Southwest, would remain on the list, meaning it will be illegal under federal law to kill or harm the animals. There are about 75 Mexican wolves.

The wildlife agency will issue a final rule next year after reviewing public input. As of late Thursday, it had received 194,188 comments dating back to June 13, when the administration announced the gray and Mexican wolf proposals. A majority of the comments oppose delisting.

The administration delisted 1,674 gray wolves thought to be living in the Northern Rocky Mountains last year and 4,432 animals in the western Great Lakes region in 2011. Officials justified the decisions by saying both wolf populations had exceeded the “minimum recovery goals” of 300 for three consecutive years.

Critics oppose federal delisting because that leaves it up to the states to decide how to manage wolves living within their boundaries. They say states have ramped up hunting quotas and fear that the gray wolf’s slow and fragile recovery could be overturned.

Gray wolves in the contiguous states have been under federal protection since 1967.

Estimates put the gray wolf population at about 2 million throughout North America in the 1500s, before the Europeans arrived. As of December 2012, when the animals were last counted, there were an estimated 6,100 in the lower 48 states, according to the Fish and Wildlife Service.

The species is not listed as endangered in Alaska, home to 7,000-11,000 of the animals. Canada has at least 40,000 gray wolves, which are also known as timber wolves.

In a notable move, the federal government reintroduced 66 gray wolves in the Yellowstone National Park in 1995-96. At the end of last year, there were 83 wolves in Yellowstone, clustered in 10 packs, according to the National Park Service.

Environmentalists fear that delisting the species would, in effect, give the green light for people to once again indiscriminately slaughter an icon of wild America.

The gray wolf had almost vanished from the continental U.S. by the 1940s. People trapped and shot adults, burned pups alive and did brutal things like wiring the jaws shut before releasing captured animals to ensure they starve to death in the wild, said Amaroq Weiss, a biologist, attorney and wolf expert at the Center for Biological Diversity, headquartered in Tucson, Ariz.

Gray wolves are found in parts of Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Idaho, Wyoming, Montana, Oregon and Washington state.

States like Colorado, which have plenty of forest land and elk and other hoofed animals that gray wolves prey upon, have no known populations. In 2011, a radio-collared male from Oregon crossed into California and wandered for 4,000 miles — likely looking for a mate — before returning home.

Conservationists say administration officials proposed delisting in response to political pressure.

“They want to wash their hands off the wolves. They don’t want to deal with the politics anymore,” Weiss said. “They’re saying that the purpose of the Endangered Species Act is simply to prevent an animal from becoming extinct. And that’s not correct. The purpose of the Endangered Species Act is to recover species that are endangered or threatened and to also protect the habitats on which they depend.”

Three delisting proposals failed in the previous decade after environmentalists successfully sued. Critics are prepared to go to court again if the current proposal is adopted.

Oregon Democratic Rep. Peter DeFazio, the ranking member of the House Natural Resources Committee, agrees with the conservationists. He and 55 other lawmakers wrote to Fish and Wildlife Director Dan Ashe in March, urging him to keep the gray wolf on the endangered list.

“I really feel that we want to try and re-establish the gray wolf across most of its historic range. We are way far away from that,” he said in a recent interview. “I’ve been involved with (gray wolves) for a couple of decades. I have yet to see a wolf in the wild. I hope someday to do that.”

The administration said science, not politics, was behind the delisting proposal. In a blog posting on June 13, Ashe said the recovering wolf population is “one of the spectacular successes of the Endangered Species Act.”

“For one reason, and one reason only, we are proposing to remove the gray wolf from the list ... they are no longer in danger of extinction now or in the foreseeable future,” he wrote.

In the proposed rule, published in the Federal Register, the administration disputed claims that the gray wolf lived throughout the lower 48 in the past. Recent studies show the animal lived pretty much where it’s found now, the government argued. Acknowledging that the species “has undergone significant range contraction in portions of its historical range,” the administration said the “species continues to be widespread and, as a whole, is stable.”

Terry Fankhauser, executive vice president of the Colorado Cattlemen’s Association, said it’s time to delist the gray wolf because new statistics show the species has “recovered amazingly.”

He said he wants Colorado to remain free of permanent wolf residents. The 4,000 ranchers who belong to his group worry that the wolves could kill their livestock if the animals make it into the state, he said.

Conservationists should accept that wolves will never be as abundant as they were centuries ago, when there were fewer people and more prey animals, he said. “There’s a responsibility ... not to live in the past, but to recognize the current ecological balance of things and manage populations accordingly,” Fankhauser said.

Last month, 75 lawmakers — most of them Republicans — led by House Natural Resources Committee Chairman Doc Hastings, R-Wash., wrote to Ashe to endorse the plan to delist the gray wolf and urge him to reconsider the decision to list the Mexican wolf as as “subspecies,” which entitles the animal to further federal protection.

Allowing the Mexican wolf population to grow would hurt ranchers in Arizona, New Mexico and other Southwestern states, they wrote.

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