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Federal judge's ruling on hunting wolves could have national impact

By John Myers / Dec 22, 2014

A federal judge's decision reinstating federal protections for wolves in the Great Lakes region could have a profound impact on other areas of the United States where wolves don't exist.

That was the analysis Monday by wolf experts gathered by the Minnesota-based International Wolf Center, which said the decision may bolster efforts that would see wolves return to places like western Colorado or the Dakotas.

"The judge's ruling touched on an issue far bigger than the Great Lakes states," said Mike Phillips, executive director of the Turner Endangered Species Fund, who headed the Yellowstone wolf reintroduction. "There could be far-flung consequences."

The decision, released Friday, may end the federal government's efforts to declare wolves recovered in certain areas of the country, even though their overall numbers are just a fraction of their original numbers in a fraction of their original range, Phillips and others suggested.



A series of judges' decisions in recent years have pushed back against the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's "piecemeal" approach to wolf recovery, Phillips said. And while Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan might have healthy wolf populations, the animal clearly is not legally recovered under the Endangered Species Act.

"Wolves are absent from 85 percent of their range ... And of that 85 percent there are areas that gray wolves could occupy in a healthy way," Phillips said, adding that federal plans so far have simply avoided dealing with wolves in those areas.

"A national plan would ... have a connectedness that shows a direction of how the nation chooses to go," said Dick Thiel, a retired Wisconsin wolf biologist. "It's essential."

The federal judge in Washington sided with animal rights groups and issued a decision effectively squelching a 2012 move by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to

remove federal protections for wolves in nine states in the Great Lakes region.

The judge's decision essentially returned full Endangered Species Act protections to wolves in the region, restoring endangered status in most states and threatened status in Minnesota.

The judge said the government moved too quickly to de-list wolves in the region because they have recovered only in Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan and not in other states. The judge also said the Great Lakes population should not have been carved out of a larger portion of the country.

The immediate result is that no wolves may be killed in Minnesota, Michigan or Wisconsin, unless a person's life is threatened. That means no public hunting or trapping for at least the foreseeable future.

The exception is in Minnesota where the threatened status allows federal trappers to kill wolves near where livestock are killed or injured.

Phillips said that the renewed federal endangered status could lead to wolves roaming into new areas on their own, but may also promote planned wolf reintroduction efforts.

Rick Duncan, Minneapolis-based attorney for the Faegre, Baker and Daniels law firm and an expert on federal wolf law, said the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has 60 days to decide to appeal the ruling, which he said would probably be a two-year process. That would mean no hunting or trapping seasons until 2017 at earliest.

But Duncan also agreed that the federal agency also could decide to start over with a more comprehensive wolf recovery plan that's not based on geographic pockets. Such an all-new effort could take years longer.

The wolf experts said they expect an increase in often unreported incidents of wolf opponents who "take matters into their own hands" by shooting wolves, Roberts noted, even though illegal killing will only make the debate more heated.

"I think there's going to be more illegal taking" of

wolves, said L. David Mech, a renowned wolf researcher for the U.S. Interior Department.

"The level of that animosity is probably going to increase," Thiel said.

Mech said the judge's ruling also could anger politicians, especially the soon to be Republican-controlled Congress, including western state lawmakers that already have criticized the act's impact on local land management.

"I can see Republicans gutting the entire Endangered Species Act" over the wolf decision, Mech said.

Mech said he supports the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's 2012 decision to de-list wolves in the Great Lakes because it's based on sound science and an accurate characterization of wolf populations in the specific area covered.

State natural resource agencies have been managing wolves well the last three years, Mech said, and while the populations may have dropped some because of hunting, the animal is in no danger of falling back to truly endangered conditions.

When asked if wolves were truly endangered in Minnesota, as the judge's decision rules, Mech said he needed only a one-word answer.

"No."

Phillips said he agreed, but added that there's a difference between biologically endangered and legally endangered and that wolves clearly still remain "legally endangered."