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National Parks Study Wolf Deaths As Agency Plans Delisting Endangered Species

By RACHEL CRAMER • 14 HOURS AGO

A wolf crosses a road near Artist Paint Pots, Yellowstone National Park, on November 07, 2017.

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Federal wildlife managers are gearing up to remove gray wolves from the Endangered Species List. But some environmentalists say the species isn't ready and that the government is basing its decision on outdated science. A group of biologists in four western national parks are looking at the impacts of wolf deaths on their packs and how this could affect the greater population.

Congress has taken a piecemeal approach to delisting gray wolves, removing federal protections one population area at a time. Gray wolves in Montana, Idaho, eastern Washington and Oregon, and northern Utah were deemed "recovered" in 2011. Wolves in Wyoming lost protection in 2017.

This March the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced it was time to remove federal protection for gray wolves throughout the country. It would primarily affect the Upper Great Lakes Region, where about two-thirds of the country's wolves live. It's not the first time delisting in this area was proposed. Wolves in Michigan, Minnesota and Wisconsin were delisted in 2011 and relisted again in 2014.

Environmental groups like the Center for Biological Diversity and Natural Resources Defense Council have challenged delisting in the past and say they are prepared to do so again. They argue wolves have not recovered since they only occupy about 20 percent of their historic range

and say there's not enough data to understand how management of one population might affect the species as a whole.

Doug Smith is Yellowstone National Park's wolf project leader. He's working with a team of biologists from Grand Tetons and Denali National Parks and the Yukon–Charley Rivers National Preserve to figure out how individual wolf deaths affect the social structures of packs and their ability to survive.

"Now, you know, wolves are just like people. The wrong personality goes, everything goes downhill. So that doesn't mean a big pack can lose just anybody, but odds are they can sustain a loss better than a small pack," says Smith.

A smaller pack may struggle to hunt and produce pups, and they might need to join another pack. An endangered species' ability to move between populations is one metric managers use to decide whether protections are still needed.

"Connectivity is one of the key issues for delisting in the Upper Great Lake States, as well as Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, and we found the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem was probably the most isolated population in the Northern Rockies. But we did find adequate connectivity to central Idaho to warrant delisting," says Smith.

Smith says it's unlikely wolves from the Northern Rockies would connect with wolves in the Upper Great Lakes.

"Because that's got hundreds of miles of agricultural land in between eastern Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota. Wolves are not getting through that. It's just unrealistic, and they will never get through that to the Lake States," says Smith.

He says unsuitable wolf habitat and a high chance of human-caused mortality are the big barriers.

“But what’s important to emphasize is both the Northern Rockies population and the Lake States population is connected to Canada, which in many ways in the motherload of wolves in North America.”

There are around 40,000-50,000 wolves in Canada, compared to around 6,000 in the U.S. The wolf population in and around Yellowstone National Park has taken off since they were reintroduced in the mid-1990s, from about 60 to almost 2,000 across the Northern Rockies. Yellowstone’s wolf population was slightly down this year, mostly due to conflicts between packs and diseases.

Smith says smaller packs have a harder time defending their territory and hunting large prey. Timing matters, too.

“And what we’re finding is pack size is critical," says Smith. "If you have a bigger pack and you lose an animal, they’re able to deal with the loss better. Season’s important. If you lose an animal right before the breeding season, it destabilizes their social structure. They probably won’t have pups.”

Beyond park boundaries, the greatest threat to wolves are humans.

“People come from all over the country and the world to just be near these animals, to experience them, to get nature kind of unvarnished, true wildness," says Smith, "and certainly wolves are part of that. And that’s something that makes this area unique and special, and we don’t want to lose that."

Smith emphasizes the need for public education to build social tolerance, as well as variable management. He says there are some places where people want wolves to have protection.

“And then there’s other places they just don’t belong and that means quick action to solve problems, and then they can withstand a hunting season. So if you have that kind of variable management from protection to kind of low tolerance, I think the public will buy into that, regardless of what agency’s calling the shots,” Smith says.

Smiths’ research comes as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is accepting public comment on its proposal to remove gray wolves from the Endangered Species List. Comments will be taken through May 14. The Service is also facing a legal challenge to its decision to hunt wolves in a previously de-listed population in Idaho’s backcountry.

The decision over delisting gray wolves could hold some implications for grizzly bears. The Service has proposed a similar population-by-population approach, which has also been challenged in the courts.