

Is the gray wolf still endangered? Depends who you ask.

The government says wolves are thriving in the lower 48, but some scientists say they still face threats from hunting and habitat fragmentation.

5 MINUTE READ

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After four decades of intense conservation efforts, it's finally time to take the [gray wolf](#) off the Endangered Species List, [the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recently announced](#).

“The facts are clear and indisputable—the gray wolf no longer meets the definition of a threatened or endangered species,” [David Bernhardt](#), acting secretary of the U.S. Department of the Interior, said in an emailed statement.

“Today the wolf is thriving on its vast range, and it is reasonable to conclude it will continue to do so in the future.”

Not so fast, say several scientists.

For one, that definition is up for debate. According to the [Endangered Species Act](#), a plant or animal can be considered endangered when it's

no longer in “danger of extinction throughout all of a significant portion of its range.” ([See 12 of our favorite wolf pictures.](#))

But gray wolves occupy less than 20 percent of their historic U.S. range, notes [Jeremy Bruskotter](#), a social scientist at the Ohio State University who has studied programs to save gray wolves in the United States.

“Does that constitute recovery? It seems like a stretch to suggest that it does,” he says.

“I’ve been watching this for 15 years, and it’s just the same story over and over again,” says Bruskotter, who published a [study in 2013 arguing against a failed federal proposal—one of many over the years—to delist the species.](#)

Before Europeans arrived, wolves roamed over nearly every inch of what’s now the U.S. Centuries’ worth of hunting, trapping, and poisoning erased the species from the lower 48 states by the 1930s. In fact, in the early 1900s, [veterinarians deliberately infected wolves in the Greater Yellowstone region](#) with mange-causing mites.

Today, more than 6,000 gray wolves can be found in fragmented populations across the West and Great Lakes, thanks to a [reintroduction program centered in Yellowstone National Park in the 1990s](#) and natural colonization from Canadian packs. (Two other lineages, the Mexican wolf and red wolf, are struggling to survive in small wild populations; neither would be affected by the proposal.)

State of the gray wolves

It’s important to remember that gray wolves have already been delisted in most places that they now occur, says [Gavin Shire](#), a spokesperson for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

In 2011, Congress passed [legislation](#) that removed federal gray wolf protections and returned management of the species back to state

wildlife agencies in Idaho, Montana, eastern Washington and Oregon, and northern Utah. Then [in 2017](#), the Fish and Wildlife Service did the same with Wyoming's wolves.

If the new proposal is passed, Shire says there'd be no change for those areas of the wolf's range. ([Learn about "the most famous wolf in the world."](#))

What would change is federal protection for wolves in states like Minnesota, Michigan, Wisconsin, which number [between 2,000 to 3,000 animals](#). Parts of Washington and Oregon would also be affected, as well as areas that wolves are just beginning to colonize, such as California.

Next comes a 60-day period during which the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service accepts comments from the public. And while that can include anything from classroom letters and editorials, Shire says what they're really looking for is "scientific information that's going to help us make the right decision in the end."

"This is not a scientific determination," says [Brett Hartl](#), who reviewed the proposal for the nonprofit Center for Biological Diversity. "It's simply an arbitrary policy choice to ignore how much habitat is unoccupied."

For example, Hartl points to how differently the wildlife service pursued bald eagle conservation.

"We didn't declare them recovered until they were found in every state, and probably at a level even higher than pre-European contact," he says.

'An environment of persecution'

It was always part of the plan to return control to the states once recovery goals were met, says [Carter Niemeyer](#), a retired biologist who was the wildlife service's wolf recovery manager for Idaho.

For the Northern Rockies wolf population in Idaho, Wyoming, and Montana, goals included maintaining populations in each state of at least 300 wolves, with 30 breeding pairs, for three years.

The problem, says Niemeyer, is that states like his native Idaho now view any individual wolves beyond those goals as “excess baggage” that can be gotten rid of with hunting and trapping.

“Those were supposed to be minimums,” he says. “We don’t manage bears that way, and we don’t manage mountain lions that way, so why do we persecute wolves this way?”

WOLVES 101 With their piercing looks and spine-tingling howls, wolves inspire both adoration and controversy around the world. Find out how many wolf species exist, the characteristics that make each wolf's howl unique, and how the wolf population in the continental United States nearly became extinct.

Many ranchers, farmers, and other landowners have been heavily opposed to reintroducing wolves, mostly due to the potential for livestock predation. Livestock owners receive compensation for any animals killed by wolves, and sometimes the wolves themselves are killed or relocated. It's also legal to hunt and trap wolves across many western states.

One hunting organization, known as the [Foundation for Wildlife Management](#), has even been offering cash rewards of up to \$1,000 for trappers who target wolves in Idaho.

All of this just points to a growing anti-wolf sentiment, says Niemeyer. ([Read why Americans are so divided over saving wolves.](#))

“I’ve been part of the recovery effort since the beginning, and I just hate to see it end in an environment of persecution again,” says Niemeyer, who also wrote the books [*Wolfer* and *Wolf Land*](#).

How many wolves do we need?

Others support delisting, such as [Neil Anderson](#), wildlife program manager for Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks.

“One of the more significant aspects of state management of wildlife, including wolves, is it gives the local public more ownership and a voice in managing these species,” he says.

Even still, Anderson admits that wolves remain a controversial species.

“Perhaps more than any other large carnivore, there seems to be more of a gap between those that want no restrictions of wolf numbers and those that want as few as possible,” says Anderson. ([See unique pictures of wolves taken in Yellowstone.](#))

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks just announced that its [annual hunting and trapping season produced 315 wolf kills](#). The harvest represents nearly 40 percent of the state’s estimated population of 850 wolves.

That kind of hunting probably won’t drive wolves back to extinction, says Bruskotter, but it also stands in the way of further wolf recovery.

He says the new proposal would end up creating pockets of wolf populations in the wild, instead of restoring self-sustaining populations of the predators across their former range.

At the end of the day, “we’re arguing about the scope of what recovery for an endangered species will look like,” says Bruskotter.