

<https://www.kqed.org/science/1946451/california-defends-wolves-argues-against-feds-removing-protections>

# California Defends Wolves, Argues Against Feds Removing Protections

Allessandra DiCorato

Aug 14

OR-25, a male gray wolf in Oregon, in 2014. OR-25 was killed illegally in 2017. Environmentalists say that removing wolves from the Endangered Species Act could encourage more hunting. (*Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife*)

California is pushing back on the federal government's proposal to delist wolves from the Endangered Species Act in the lower 48 states. This step would remove wolves' federal protections, transferring decisions about wolf management to individual states and tribes.

The proposal,  
announced in March,  
frames the wolves'  
current status as "one  
of the greatest  
comebacks in  
conservation history."  
But environmentalists  
and now the California  
Fish and Game  
Commission have  
argued that, to make a  
full recovery, wolves  
still need Endangered  
Species Act  
protections.

On July 15, the  
Commission sent a  
[letter](#) to the U.S. Fish  
and Wildlife Services,  
strongly opposing the  
proposed delisting.  
The letter, signed by  
president Eric Sklar,  
states the ruling would  
end recovery efforts  
prematurely.

“The limited gray wolf return to some of the states that will be impacted by the proposed rule, including California, has been for only a brief period in the thousands of years history of gray wolf as a species,” states Sklar, “and most of the suitable habitat in these states has not yet been repopulated.”

An excerpt from a letter addressed to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service from the California Fish and Game Commission

Just this week, California also announced its intent to file a lawsuit against the Trump administration’s overhaul of the Endangered Species Act. If the changes are implemented, federal agencies would be able

to publicly share the economic impact of protecting endangered species. Threatened species, considered by biologists on their way to being critically endangered, would not receive the same protections as endangered species, as they do currently. The review process for actions taken by agencies affecting listed species would simplify. It is unclear how wolves would be affected by these modifications.

### **Where Wolves Should Roam**

Though California wolves would retain their listing in the state's Endangered Species Act no matter the ruling, the

Commission's stance against delisting is not purely symbolic. The ruling would likely affect the state's wolf population by restricting the numbers of wolves that enter from other states. After the last wolf in California was shot in 1924, wolves only started reappearing in the state in 2011, when one wandered over the Oregon border. Biologists say that California's future wolf population will depend on expanding from other states.

"It's good to see West Coast states that have an interest in wolf recovery speaking out about ... the proposal that would undermine wolf recovery in their

states,” said Brett Hartl, the government affairs director at the Center for Biological Diversity. “California is a good example of why their proposal doesn’t make sense, because wolves are definitely not recovered in California.”

***'Discounting California and other vital, historic habitats ignores science and the law.'*** Eric Sklar, California Fish and Game Commission

Determining the success of wolf recovery hinges on a discussion of where the predator should roam. Some controversy does exist over wolves’ historical range. In the proposal, the USFWS chooses to define ‘historic range’ as most of the

continental United States except western California, southwestern Arizona, and the southeast United States.

Although 6,000 wolves now live in the continental United States, only one pack frequents California. Most people agree that populations have recovered in the northern Rocky Mountains and western Great Lakes, but the Commission points out that this range is only a tiny fraction of both the wolves' historic range and the habitat scientists consider suitable. It calls the proposal's definition of range "nonsensical."

“Discounting California and other vital, historic habitats ignores science and the law,” the letter states.

### **Relying on Outdated Science**

In the letter, Sklar says that much of the rule bases its analysis of the extent of recovery on “decades-old science.” The Commission argues that the criteria the USFWS uses to measure recovery are based on outdated science.

Peer reviewers of the proposal echoed this sentiment, adding that the cited studies were chosen haphazardly. In many cases, the reviewer wrote,



“results in the best journals (ranked independently on a worldwide scale of impact factors) were ignored or overlooked, in favor of non-peer-reviewed interpretations or results from lower ranked journals.” The same reviewer notes that “in a few cases, the stronger evidence was paid for by the USFWS or was co-authored by USFWS staff.”

### **What’s Next For Wolves?**

There is, perhaps, no more polarizing endangered species than the gray wolf. Even as environmentalists celebrate the return of wolves, some ranchers

view the predators as a threat to their livestock and livelihoods. The federal proposal chooses largely to ignore the threat anti-wolf communities may pose to wolf populations, stating that the motivations behind such attitudes are poorly understood. But the California Fish and Game Commission says that the ability of public opinion to impact wolf populations has been studied and should be considered more substantially in the delisting proposal.

“Since targeted extirpation of the species was one of the main factors that led to gray wolf’s near extinction in the U.S.,”

the letter argues, “it behooves USFWS to conduct a thorough analysis to demonstrate that such attitudes will not become a detriment to the future of the species.”

Hartl says he’s seen this happen before, when wolves were delisted in the Great Lakes in 2011 and public tolerance for them declined. When wolves are prematurely delisted, Hartl warns, “it creates the perception, especially in rural areas, that it’s okay to shoot a wolf.”

USFWS will now review the public comments on its proposal.

Some 750,000

comments are currently listed on the USFWS website. Some environmental groups believe the number may balloon to nearly 2 million once the mail-in comments are counted. Hartl expects the USFWS will take at least a year to review all substantive comments, and anticipates a final decision in fall 2020.

The Obama administration also proposed delisting the gray wolf in 2013, and faced a similarly extensive comment period. The ruling was largely abandoned, though people disagree why; USFWS cites logistics, and environmentalists say the proposal languished in the face

of inescapable facts  
and public outrage.