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U.S. plans to lift protections for gray wolves in the Lower 48, a move that would restart hunts in Wisconsin

[Lee Bergquist and Paul A. Smith](#), Milwaukee Journal Sentinel Published 12:26 p.m. CT March 6, 2019 | Updated 9:09 a.m. CT March 7, 2019

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said Wednesday that it will propose rules that would remove protections for the gray wolf in the Lower 48 states and return wolf management to the states and tribes.

The decision, first reported by the Associated Press, is sure to spark a new legal battle over protections for wolves and how best to regulate a species whose population is stable or growing in areas such as northern Wisconsin but is struggling in other areas of its historic range.

Gray wolves are protected by the federal Endangered Species Act in most of the Lower 48, including Wisconsin, and cannot be hunted or killed, except under special circumstances.

“Recovery of the gray wolf under the Endangered Species Act is one of our nation's great conservation successes, with the wolf joining other cherished species, such as the bald eagle, that have been brought back from the brink with the help of the ESA,” David Bernhardt, acting secretary of the Department of Interior, said in a presentation at the 84th [North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference](#) in Denver.

The agency said it would “soon” write regulations that would include a public comment period. The goal is to allow agencies such as Wisconsin’s Department of Natural Resources to manage the species.

But aside from a growing wolf population in some areas, the Fish and Wildlife Service did not provide a rationale for Wednesday’s announcement, or how the move could satisfy a federal court ruling that has kept protections of the wolves intact.

Further, it did not provide a timeframe for the rule-making process.

Eric Lobner, DNR wildlife director, is among a handful of Wisconsin natural resources professionals participating in the conference in Denver. Lobner was present for Bernhardt's announcement.

"I was floored," Lobner said by phone Wednesday afternoon. "We had no idea it was coming."

Last summer, the federal agency said it was conducting a scientific review of wolf populations.

But all recent attempts to remove the wolf from protections of the Endangered Species Act, including bills in Congress and budget riders, have failed.

In December 2014, a federal judge struck down the Fish and Wildlife Service's decision in 2012 to remove gray wolves in Wisconsin, Minnesota and Michigan from the endangered species list.

Wisconsin law allowed for hunting and trapping wolves before the federal court ruling, which means the DNR could restart a hunting and trapping season if protections are lifted.

Wisconsin held hunting and trapping seasons for three years, killing 117 wolves in 2012, 257 in 2013 and 154 in 2014 before the judge's ruling stopped the practice.

Lobner said the DNR halted development of its wolf management plan when the species was removed from state control.

The state law that outlines the rules for a public wolf harvest is still in place, however. If state control of wolf management was returned to Wisconsin, the DNR would likely need a couple of months to work with its wolf committee to develop a harvest quota, allow for permit applications and perform a lottery for hunting licenses, Lobner said.

The agency would also begin to work on an updated wolf management plan.

Wednesday's announcement drew sharply divergent reactions.

"This is really good news," said Sen. Tom Tiffany (R-Minocqua.) "The State of Wisconsin should be allowed to manage wildlife species in the state, rather than leaving it to bureaucrats in Washington."

Frustration, he said, began building in the past several years as the wolf population has grown and conflicts with farmers and hunters have increased, Tiffany said.

But animal protection groups were highly critical of the agency's announcement.

"This disgusting proposal would be a death sentence for gray wolves across the country," Collette Adkins, a senior attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity, said in a statement.

"The Trump administration is dead set on appeasing special interests that want to kill wolves. We're working hard to stop them."

In December, the group joined the Humane Society of the United States and petitioned the Fish and Wildlife Service to maintain protection for gray wolves under the Endangered Species Act.

Wisconsin is one of about a dozen states with a wild gray wolf population.

Wolf comeback in mid-1970s

Before European settlement, wolves roamed all of Wisconsin. But by 1865, the Legislature had approved its first wolf bounty of \$5, and by the late 1950s, wolves had been wiped out in the state.

Gray wolves came under the protection of the Endangered Species Act in 1974.

Wolves migrated back to Wisconsin in the mid-1970s and the population slowly began to build.

In 2000, the DNR estimated the population at 248 and 10 years later it had grown to 704.

In the latest available count, the DNR estimated the minimum count over the winter of 2017-18 at 905 to 944 wolves — a drop of 2.2 percent from the previous year.

The DNR says it believes that the population could be leveling off as wolves begin to occupy less suitable habitat.

A 2014 DNR survey of state residents found generally good support for wolves, but less support for the animals in "wolf range." The lowest levels of support for wolves were found among deer hunters and farmers.