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Federal plan to delist wolves in Lower 48 draws mixed reactions

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OR-7 trots past a trail camera carrying what a wildlife biologist said is an elk leg in the Southern Oregon Cascades. On March 6, Acting Secretary of the Interior David Bernhardt announced plans to delist wolves, returning management to states and tribes.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

A proposal to lift endangered species protections for gray wolves across the Lower 48 states is inflaming old tensions between Northwest ranchers and wildlife advocates.

On March 6, Acting Secretary of the Interior David Bernhardt announced the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will soon come up with a plan for delisting wolves, returning management to states and tribes.

“Recovery of the gray wolf under the Endangered Species Act is one 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,” said Fish and Wildlife spokesman Gavin Shire.

Jerome Rosa, executive director of the Oregon Cattlemen’s Association, said the announcement confirms that wolf recovery is on track, and gives ranchers in Western Oregon more ability to address conflicts between wolves and livestock.

“Hopefully this will add more tools for our ranchers in the rest of the state to control this species that is really growing at a successful rate,” Rosa said.

The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife removed wolves from the state Endangered Species List in 2015, allowing for wildlife managers in Eastern Oregon to kill wolves that repeatedly attack livestock under certain circumstances, as defined in the state Wolf Conservation and Management Plan.

Wolves remain federally protected, however, west of highways 395, 78 and 95, limiting ranchers to non-lethal forms of deterrence such as range riders and fladry — lines of rope mounted along fence lines with colored flags that flap in the wind, intended to scare wolves from pastures.

Veril Nelson, a southwest Oregon rancher, serves as co-chairman on the cattlemen’s association wolf committee. He said local producers need the ability to kill problem wolves that repeatedly prey on cows, citing the Rogue pack near Crater Lake that has notched multiple confirmed attacks on livestock over the past year in Jackson and Klamath counties.

“With that wolf pack, killing has become habitual,” Nelson said. “They’re going to keep doing that.”

ODFW spokeswoman Michelle Dennehy said that, if wolves are delisted, the Oregon wolf plan would apply statewide. Western Oregon would begin in Phase I of management rules, which requires four confirmed attacks on livestock within a six-month period before the agency will even consider killing wolves from an offending pack.

Eastern Oregon is currently in Phase III of the plan, which requires just two confirmed attacks over any given time period. And Dennehy is quick to add that, just because those qualifications are met, does not mean lethal take is automatic.

“There are other considerations,” Dennehy said. “Non-lethal (deterrents) must be in effect, but not working, for any lethal control authorization.”

At last count, Oregon had a minimum of 124 wolves at the end of 2017. The 2018 ODFW annual wolf report and population estimate will not be available until April, Dennehy said.

ODFW is also in the process of updating its wolf plan, which is now four years past due. A draft plan will be released sometime this month, Dennehy said, though the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission has not yet scheduled a public hearing and final vote on the changes.

In Washington, the state has 22 wolf packs, mostly concentrated in the northeast corner of the state. Scott Nielsen, president of the Stevens County Cattlemen’s Association, said cattlemen are pleased to see a potential delisting at the federal level, but issues still remain with how the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife handles wolf attacks and investigations.

“This has been really hard on the ranchers,” he said. “I am highly critical of WDFW I’ve watched what they’ve done and how they’ve done it, and I feel betrayed by them.”

Meanwhile, environmental groups slammed the Fish and Wildlife Service’s proposal to delist wolves, describing it as premature.

“Given that gray wolves in the Lower 48 states occupy such a small percentage of their historical habitat, it is almost laughable for the Fish and Wildlife Service to determine that they are successfully recovered,” said John Mellgren, an attorney with the Western Environmental Law Center.

“On its face, this appears to be politically motivated,” Mellgren said. “We look forward to reviewing the draft delisting rule, and look forward to taking the Fish and Wildlife Service to court should its proposal not be based on what the science tells us.”

Collette Adkins, a senior attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity, said delisting would essentially be a death sentence for gray wolves across the country.

“The Trump administration is dead set on appeasing special interests that want to kill wolves,” Adkins said. “We’re working hard to stop them.”