

Gray Wolves Poised to Lose Protected Status

March 6, 2019NATHAN SOLIS

(CN) – The gray wolf population across the United States has rebounded to the point that it will soon lose its protected status, the federal government announced Wednesday.

Acting U.S. Interior Secretary David Bernhardt said the federal government would work to remove the gray wolf's protected status from the lower 48 states. Gray wolves nearly disappeared from the United States in the early 20th century due to overhunting of the American bison and an extensive use of strychnine poison in predatory control programs. But a spokesperson for U.S. Fish and Wildlife said Endangered Species Act protections have allowed the gray wolf population, like the bald eagle, to return from the brink of extinction.

Environmentalists fear removing the gray wolf's protected status will make the animal vulnerable to trophy hunters and trappers.

“The livestock industry and trophy hunters want wolves dead, but we’ll make sure the feds fulfill their obligation to restore wolves across the country,” Collette Adkins, a senior attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity, said in a statement.

The House of Representatives [approved](#) a bill to remove gray wolf protections last November. The Manage Our Wolves Act allows the Interior Department to

remove the wolves' protected status, enshrine that policy in law and restrict judicial review of listing decisions.

The new proposal returns management of gray wolves to the states and Native American tribes. The removal of protected status is a big win for hunters and property owners who will be allowed to kill wolves.

Natural habitat ranges for the gray wolf include Canada, Alaska, and the Great Lakes states, along with small populations in Washington, Idaho, northern Oregon and Montana.

The gray wolf received federal protection in the 1970s. Former President Barack Obama initially removed protections for the gray wolf due to what the administration believed was a significant resurgence of its numbers.

But a federal court reversed that decision in 2014 after determining the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service failed to adequately prove the population had recovered.

Only about 1,000 gray wolves remained when they received protected status in 1975. Today, estimates show about 5,000 wolves live across the contiguous United States and even more in pockets across other regions.

The Center for Biological Diversity, which plans to fight the delisting in court, says the latest efforts to remove the wolves' protected status will slow or stop any recovery progress. Wolves will likely not be able to thrive in ranges where they have not been seen in decades, like the Adirondacks in northeastern New York state or the southern Rockies in Colorado.

After the new proposal to delist the gray wolves is published in the Federal Register later this year, the public will be able to comment. There is no set timeframe for when that will happen.

The Center for Biological Diversity sued the federal government last year for lacking a national recovery plan for gray wolves.