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Feds plan to lift endangered species protections for gray wolves nationwide

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A close up image of a gray wolf in autumn. (Dreamstime/TNS) TNS

By [Kale Williams](#) | [The Oregonian/OregonLive](#) and [The Associated Press](#)

U.S. wildlife officials plan to lift protections for gray wolves across the Lower 48 states, a move certain to re-ignite the legal battle over a predator that's rebounding in some regions but absent in others.

Acting Interior Secretary David Bernhardt announced the proposal during a Wednesday speech before a wildlife conference in Denver, [according to the Associated Press](#).

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Spokesman Gavin Shire told the news agency the proposal is based on wolves successfully recovering from widespread extermination over the past century.

Gray wolves received endangered species protections in 1975 when there were about 1,000 of them left. There are now more than 5,000 living across the contiguous U.S.

In Oregon, there were a minimum of 124 wolves in at least a dozen packs, mostly concentrated in the northeast corner of the state, according to a 2018 report from the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife. Of the 13 wolves that died in Oregon in 2018, 12 deaths were caused by humans.



Still, that number represents solid growth since the canids first began to repopulate the state about a decade ago, wildlife officials have said. Their resurgence in the region has spawned conflict between environmental advocates and livestock producers.

The disagreement between the two groups came to a head earlier this year when conservationists pulled out of negotiations over changes to the state's controversial wolf management plan.



The state's wolf management plan has been contentious since the endangered canids returned to Oregon. Livestock producers and hunters have said wolves should be subject to lethal control because they prey on their herds and impact their livelihoods.

Environmental advocates have countered that wolves are an important part of the ecosystem and there are many non-lethal ways of deterring wolves from killing cattle and sheep, many of which graze on public land.

In western Oregon, wolves are protected under the Endangered Species Act and are managed by the U.S. Department of Fish and Wildlife. In eastern Oregon, wolves enjoy fewer protections and are managed by state wildlife officials. Oregon Wild, one of the groups that pulled out of the wolf management plan negotiations, points out that the area where wolves currently enjoy federal protection in Oregon only has one known pack.

"It is far too early premature to declare wolves recovered and to strip protections from them in the Western two-thirds of Oregon," the group said in a statement. "We will be looking closely at this decision and considering next steps with our national partners."

Environmental groups say the gray wolf remains absent across a majority of its former range, including portions of the Adirondack Mountains in New York State and southern Rocky Mountains of Colorado and New Mexico.

Lifting protections would allow hunters to kill wolves and likely slow their expansion. Hunting already is allowed in the Northern Rockies states of Montana, Wyoming and Idaho.

Collette Adkins with the Center for Biological Diversity says her group will go to court to attempt to stop the government from lifting protections.

-- Kale Williams