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Wolves and the Endangered Species Act, an Explainer

The Trump Administration plans to delist the gray wolf across the Lower 48. Here's why that's happening and what it means for the future of the species.

[photo]

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During a speech on Wednesday that was closed to both the press and public, Acting Secretary of the Interior [David Bernhardt](#) announced plans to remove gray wolves from the list of species protected by the Endangered Species Act throughout the Lower 48. The move immediately drew condemnation from conservation groups.

Why is the Trump administration taking this action now and what does it mean for the species? Let's run through the details.

Where Gray Wolves Live

Around [two million](#) gray wolves used to roam the entirety of the North American continent. But European settlement largely extirpated the species from what are now the Lower 48. When ESA protections were granted to the species in 1975, only about 1,000 of the animals remained in a small area around the Great Lakes. (About 60,000 wolves remain in Alaska and northern Canada.)

In 1995, 66 wolves were re-introduced to Yellowstone National Park and Idaho. That recovery plan also allowed for the natural dispersal of wolves into the area from Canada. Since then, the population in the American portion of the northern Rocky Mountains and westward has grown to about 1,700, which now live in Montana, Wyoming, Washington, and Oregon. They're even starting to spread into northern California.

Since the ESA listing, the population of wolves around the Great Lakes has grown to about 4,000, but that number is [disputed](#) by pretty much everyone involved.

Why People Like Wolves

As an apex predator, wolves create [a trophic cascade of benefits](#) in the ecosystems they inhabit. As we all know from [listening to Elton John sing](#) in *The Lion King*, the natural world is a complex web of interconnection; change something as small as [a species of grass](#), and it can have wide-reaching impacts that imperil even large animals. Change something as important as a wolf, and it can alter the course of rivers.

That's exactly what's happened in Yellowstone National Park since that 1995 wolf reintroduction. There, they corrected an overpopulation of elk, fixing an imbalance caused by that species voracious appetite for plants. As a result, everything from beavers to birds of prey returned to more balanced population numbers. Plus, wolves achieved that management of ecosystems [far cheaper and much more effectively](#) than humans alone would have. For people who like wolves, it simply makes sense to return them to as much of their former habitat as possible.

Why People Don't Like Wolves

Wolves like to kill and eat stuff that you and I also like to kill and eat. That might be a lamb or calf, putting them into conflict with ranchers, or it might be the aforementioned elk, putting them into conflict with hunters. In addition, ESA protections for wolves may restrict the activities of big businesses like industrial agriculture or oil and gas extraction in places where wolves live.

Some people also consider wolves scary, despite [overwhelming evidence that they pose virtually no threat to human life](#).

Why the Government Wants to De-List Wolves

It's not just the Trump administration that wants to see wolves taken off the list of animals protected by the Endangered Species Act. Efforts to do that have been ongoing since at least 2003. The short answer as to why? Politics. Politicians in red states see a wolf delisting as a way to appeal to their rural audiences. Every politician who takes money from the agriculture or oil and gas industries is under pressure to remove protections for the species.

Of course, the ESA is intended to rehabilitate the populations of threatened species, so it contains a mechanism for withdrawing its protections from a species once it has reached a predetermined level. Ensuring that this function is maintained may also remove political threats to the ESA itself.

The Argument for Keeping Wolves on the ESA

Wolf populations in specific areas may have reached sustainable levels, but wolves have only returned to a very small portion of their historic range. For those who see the value wolves bring to wider ecosystems, it makes sense that retaining listed status will help them continue to expand their ranges.

Removing them from the ESA won't strip wolves of all protections. States like Washington and California have robust wolf management plans in place, and are likely capable of offering the species adequate protections within their borders. But wolves range widely and aren't constrained by lines on a map. A population that crosses the border from Washington into Idaho, for instance, will also be

crossing from a state [where they're protected](#) to a state [actively attempting to reduce wolf populations](#). And that may impair the species' ability to sustainably occupy the region.

Is It Possible for Humans and Wolves to Successfully Coexist?

Despite the rhetoric put forward by big industry lobbying dollars, hunting, trapping, or poisoning wolves has actually [been demonstrated to increase their predation on livestock](#), increasing conflict with independent ranchers. Wolves live in complex social systems which can be thrown into disarray by the loss of an individual member. Look at a wolf pack as a single entity, rather than a group of individual animals, and that pack effectively behaves like an injured animal that's unable to successfully hunt its natural prey if it loses an important individual or individuals to a hunter. This is what often causes a pack to turn to an unnatural food source: Livestock.

People who like wolves argue that it's [much more effective](#) to employ non-lethal deterrents like livestock guardian dogs, range riders, or even flags, balloons, or [inflatable bendy men](#) to help reinforce in wolves that they have no business entering the territory of men.

And wolves bring benefits beyond simply taking care of ecosystem management for us. In Yellowstone, for instance, wolf-related tourism brings [\\$35 million a year](#) to the local economy.

What You Can Do About It

While Bernhardt announced his intention to strike wolves from their ESA listing Wednesday, the plan must still be opened for public comment before it can move forward. When that happens you should give your government your opinion. If you feel strongly about protections for wolves, then you can also donate to organizations like the [Center for Biological Diversity](#), which will be challenging the measure in court. And in the long term, you can support candidates and legislation who are trying to get corporate money out of politics. [Ninety percent of Americans](#) support the Endangered Species Act, but corporate donations have been shown to [coincide with attacks on it](#) from the politicians we elect.