



ENDANGERED SPECIES

Trump admin says gray wolves are restored; enviros doubt it

Michael Doyle, E&E News
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The Trump administration today announced the imminent removal of Endangered Species Act protections for the Lower 48 states' population of the gray wolf, claiming victory in a long-running fight that many wildlife advocates vow is far from over.

Appearing in the presidential battleground state of Minnesota, Interior Secretary David Bernhardt cast the wolf's recovery as an unalloyed success story for the Trump team.

"Today's action reflects the Trump administration's continued commitment to species conservation based on the parameters of the law and the best scientific and commercial data available," Bernhardt said.

In March 2019, the Fish and Wildlife Service proposed delisting the species, first identified as endangered decades ago, after concluding the population in the Lower 48 had rebounded. The wolf's population now numbers an estimated 6,000 in the continental United States (Greenwire, March 14, 2019).



The Trump administration removed the gray wolf from the endangered species list. Derek Bakken/Flickr

The delisting will take effect 60 days after its formal publication in the Federal Register on Tuesday.

"This final rule puts the process of managing the gray wolf back where it belongs, in the capable hands of individual states," said Rep. Liz Cheney (R-Wyo.).

But even before the afternoon announcement staged at the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge, environmental groups were promising to sue.

"Again and again, the courts have rejected premature removal of wolf protection," said Collette Adkins, carnivore conservation director at the Center for Biological Diversity. "But instead of pursuing further wolf recovery, the Fish and Wildlife Service has just adopted the broadest, most destructive delisting rule yet."

Environmental groups say 1.8 million digital comments were submitted opposing the gray wolf delisting proposal, amounting to the largest number of comments ever received on an ESA issue in the 1973 law's history, according to the Center for Biological Diversity (Greenwire, July 16, 2019).

Peer science reviewers also questioned FWS's decision not to consider distinct population segments of the wolf.

"Decisionmakers are prioritizing politics over science," Sylvia Fallon, senior director at the Natural Resources Defense Council, said today. "Wolves are still missing from much of their remaining habitat in the West and throughout the Northeast."

Prior to their ESA listing, gray wolves declined in number due to government-funded predator eradication programs and the loss of historical habitat, among other causes.

"European settlers attempted to eliminate the wolf entirely, primarily due to the real or perceived threats to livestock, and the U.S. Congress passed a wolf bounty that covered the Northwest Territories in 1817," FWS recounted.

Since the 1990s, surveys show, gray wolf populations have recovered. FWS cited wolf protection commitments by the Great Lakes states, as well as California, Oregon, Washington and others, as further reason for confidence.

This action does not affect Mexican gray wolves, which remain listed under the ESA.

The northern Rocky Mountains' population was already delisted in a 2008 decision that survived court challenges.

Since the 1990s, surveys show the gray wolf population in Minnesota has consistently exceeded 2,000 individuals. Populations in Michigan and Wisconsin have exceeded 100 individuals every year as well, and other states host populations of their own.

"President Trump's administration has focused on proactive measures, including partnerships with organizations, to ensure listed species flourish to the point of recovery," said FWS Director Aurelia Skipwith. "Today is a win for the gray wolf and the American people."

Beyond the various U.S. populations, an additional 12,000 or so gray wolves are estimated to live in eastern Canada, while others inhabit western Canada.

FWS will continue to monitor the species for five years. The agency can relist the species and provide federal protections again if the population declines and it's deemed necessary