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Gray Wolf Protections Stripped, Stirring Lawsuit Threats

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- Fish and Wildlife has cited comebacks of animal
- Conservation groups are planning litigation

The Interior Department announced Thursday it will strip endangered species protections from the gray wolf.

Environmental groups vowed to challenge the decision in court, saying it violates the Endangered Species Act by ignoring the “best available science.” If Democrat Joe Biden wins the presidency, his administration could seek to overturn the move.

“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,” said Interior Secretary David Bernhardt.

The announcement “simply reflects the determination that this species is neither a threatened nor endangered species based on the specific factors Congress has laid out in the law,” Bernhardt said.

‘Greatest Comebacks’

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s action culminates a rulemaking (RIN: 1018-BD60) launched in 2019. The agency said the gray wolf had virtually disappeared from the lower 48 states by the early 20th century, but now roams across nine states in stable, healthy populations, thanks to “one of the greatest comebacks for an animal in U.S. conservation history,” according to the agency’s website.

All told, more than 6,000 gray wolves now range across the U.S., exceeding the combined recovery goals for the Northern Rocky Mountains and Western Great Lakes populations, the service has said.

“After more than 45 years as a listed species, the gray wolf has exceeded all conservation goals for recovery,” Bernhardt said.

Supporters of the delisting plan also say gray wolves are killing farmers’ and ranchers’ livestock.

“President Trump’s administration is taking bold action to help both states and wildlife,” said Sen. John Barrasso (R-Wyo.), chairman of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee.

Need Protection?

Congressional Democrats, however, joined environmentalists in blasting the action.

“Delisting decisions should be made by scientists and based on scientific data, not politics,” said Rep. Don Beyer (D-Va.) “The Trump administration’s bad approach which disregards science has again produced a bad outcome here. This decision is designed to help Trump’s political cronies, not to achieve the best result to protect wildlife.”

Conservation groups say gray wolves are only starting to recover in places like Northern California and the Pacific Northwest, and still need federal protection to explore habitat in the Southern Rockies and the Northeast.

The groups also say the gray wolf helps keep ecosystems in balance by killing off exploding populations of deer and elk.

The Western Environmental Law Center said the wolves’ low population numbers in West Coast states “lay the groundwork for a legal challenge” a coalition of groups will file.

Courts have “again and again” rejected attempts to end federal protections for gray wolves, the Center for Biological Diversity’s Collette Adkins said in a statement. Federal courts in Oregon, Vermont, and Washington, D.C., have all rejected attempts to downlist certain regional groups, though the delisting of gray wolves in Wyoming was upheld in 2017.

The center “intends to file suit to challenge this misguided rule, and we hope the courts do the right thing to ensure wolf recovery in the U.S.,” Adkins said.

Earthjustice “plans on using every tool in our tool box to challenge this decision when it’s made,” said Elizabeth Trotter, a spokeswoman for the environmental group.

Fish and Wildlife tried to delist the wolf populations in the northern Rockies and western Great Lakes starting in 2008, but was overridden by court decisions that cited procedural flaws in its actions.

Interior’s decision on Thursday doesn’t affect the Mexican gray wolf.

—With assistance from Ellen M. Gilmer.