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Feds to announce wolf delisting Thursday in Minnesota
Interior Secretary David Bernhardt will make the long-awaited announcement at the Minnesota River Valley National Wildlife Refuge.

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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on Thursday will announce a new rule to remove federal Endangered Species Act protections for gray wolves across the lower 48 states.

U.S. Interior Secretary David Bernhardt, who oversees the Fish and Wildlife Service, is slated to make the announcement at the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife refuge in Bloomington, Minnesota.

The move will hand wolf management back to individual states and tribal governments, allowing each state to decide if hunting and trapping should be allowed to cull wolf numbers.

The federal plan will “delist” wolves across all the contiguous U.S., even where they do not exist, although acts of Congress already removed federal protections for Rocky Mountain and other western wolves.



U.S. Interior Secretary David Bernhardt will be in Minnesota Thursday to announce the long-awaited plan to remove gray wolves from federal Endangered Species Act protections, handing wolf management to state and tribal resource agencies. Similar efforts by past administrations have been struck-down in the courts. (Photo courtesy of the International Wolf Center)

The plan — first promised by the Trump Administration in June 2018 and formally announced in March 2019 — is being heralded as a success story for the Endangered Species Act and a chance to let states decide how to handle the big canine that is vilified by some people and idolized by others.

While the rule applies to the entire lower 48 states it will have the most impact in Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan’s Upper Peninsula where sizable populations of gray wolves exist and where states could soon resume hunting and trapping seasons to cull their numbers.

The new rule, which will have a 30-day comment period once published in the Federal Register, is another do-over for the Fish and Wildlife Service after federal courts have repeatedly nullified past efforts to scratch gray wolves off the Endangered Species Act list as debate rages on whether the big canines are truly “recovered” or not.

The most recent of those delisting efforts, in 2012, allowed state agencies to hold wolf trapping and hunting seasons for three years until late 2014 when a federal judge ruled that the agency had erred in taking wolves off the endangered list too soon. A federal appeals court upheld the decision in 2017, keeping wolves protected across the region to this point.

Livestock farmers and some hunting groups have long pushed to take wolves off the endangered list, saying the animals have rebounded to high numbers in enough areas to lose federal protections.

Supporters of delisting say Minnesota can have both a healthy wolf population and also wolf management — including hunting and trapping seasons — to keep wolf numbers in check, reduce conflicts with livestock and pet owners and satisfy deer hunters in northern counties.

“The wolf, in our minds, has met recovery goals for decades already,” said Craig Engwall, executive director of the Minnesota Deer Hunters Association. “We fully support restoration of state management for wolves like they manage every other species.”

Engwall said he expects the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources could set up both wolf hunting and trapping seasons for fall 2021, “and we hope that we don’t see the courts step in and stay this again.”

But wolf supporters say many states have been overzealous in killing wolves when they had the chance, leaving them at risk of falling back to endangered status, and that wolves haven’t rebounded in enough areas to be declared an officially “recovered” species. They say dropping protections across the lower 48 would doom any chances of their spreading to other states where they could thrive if allowed to.

“Again and again, the courts have rejected premature removal of wolf protection,” Collette Adkins, carnivore conservation director at the Center for Biological Diversity, told the News Tribune. “But instead of pursuing further wolf recovery, the Fish and Wildlife Service has just adopted the broadest, most destructive delisting rule yet. The courts recognize, even if the feds don’t, that the Endangered Species Act requires real wolf recovery, including in the southern Rockies and other places with ideal wolf habitat.”

Jamie Rappaport Clark, president of the group Defenders of Wildlife, and a former U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director, called the federal move “premature and reckless.”

“Gray wolves occupy only a fraction of their former range and need continued federal protection to fully recover,” Clark said in a statement to the News Tribune.

Wolves across the lower 48 states were hunted, trapped and poisoned to near-extinction for centuries after European settlement until they gained federal protection in 1975. By then only about 500 wolves remained in the lower 48 states, all of them in Northeastern Minnesota.

There are now an estimated 6,000 gray wolves (sometimes called eastern or timber wolves) roaming in the lower 48 states, including about 2,700 in Minnesota, more than 1,000 in Wisconsin and more than 500 in Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

Wolves have been technically listed as "threatened" for most of the last 40 years in Minnesota, which has allowed limited, targeted trapping of wolves by the U.S. Department of Agriculture near where pets and livestock have been killed. That program has killed about 200 wolves each year in Minnesota even under their protected status. Wolves have been listed as "endangered" in Wisconsin and Michigan and no lethal control has been allowed since 2014.

Other stable populations are located in the Rocky Mountain west and Pacific Northwest. Colorado voters next week will decide whether their state should reintroduce wolves to that ecosystem. The proposal would not impact Mexican gray wolves, which are listed separately under the Endangered Species Act. The estimated 12,000 gray wolves in Alaska also are not impacted by the move.

Survey shows broad support for wolves in Minnesota

Minnesota natural resource officials, anticipating the federal delisting, have been reworking their wolf management plan this year to update both public sentiment on wolves and the animal's current population in the state.

The Department of Natural Resources has called together a volunteer panel of interested parties, from farmers and deer hunters to wolf supporters, meeting remotely by video, to advise them on the future of wolves here. The DNR also is asking for public comments on how the state should handle wolves.

A recent University of Minnesota poll taken for the DNR found widely divergent views on wolves among Minnesotans, but found the vast majority of those surveyed support having wolves in the state. The survey found that, among the general public, 86% of those polled want the same, more or even many more wolves in the state, while only 14.2% wanted fewer or no wolves.

Wolf support was a bit lower among deer hunters as a separate group, of which 66.8% expressed support for maintaining the state's wolf population. The response from northern Minnesota farmers was more tepid, with 47.2% approval and 42.5% expressing disapproval of the state's current wolf population.

The poll found a much broader split on whether Minnesota should allow hunting and trapping of wolves. A full 80% or more of livestock farmers and deer hunters support hunting and trapping seasons on wolves. Among the general public, only 41% support wolf hunting and only 30% support wolf trapping.

Survey questionnaires were sent to 9,750 homes across the state, including to 5,250 general public residents, 2,000 adult resident deer hunters and 2,500 livestock producers who farm in the wolf range of northern Minnesota.

How to comment on the future of wolves in Minnesota

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources is in the process of updating its wolf management plan, anticipating federal action that would hand control the animals back to state and tribal governments. The management plan, and potential legislative action, would guide any future wolf hunting and trapping in the state.

That includes seeking public input this fall as well as input from a “stakeholders” group comprised of farmers, hunters, wolf supporters, biologists and others.

You can learn more about the process at dnr.state.mn.us/wolves/index.html. The public is invited to comment on wolf management at engage.dnr.state.mn.us/wolf-plan.

A timeline of wolves in Minnesota

Pre-European settlement: Wolves roam statewide, from prairies to deep north woods.

1840s through 1960s: Bounties issued for wolves which are trapped, poisoned and even shot from airplanes to reduce their numbers and reduce predation on livestock. The first Minnesota bounty is \$3 per wolf.

1970: With wolf numbers dwindling, the Superior National Forest, home to nearly all of the remaining wolves in the lower 48 states, is declared closed to all wolf hunting and trapping.

1974: Federal Endangered Species Act (which passed in 1973) is applied to all wolves in the lower 48 states. Gray or timber wolf numbers believed to be as low as 500 in the continental U.S., all of them in Northeastern Minnesota.

March 9, 1978: Gray wolf officially listed as endangered throughout the lower 48 states, except in Minnesota, where it's listed as threatened. Recovery goal lists at least 1,200 wolves for Minnesota.

Aug. 10, 1983: Official federal rule adopted allowing limited government agency trapping and killing of wolves near where livestock have been killed in Minnesota. That program continues today, run by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, killing an average of 200 wolves annually.

June 29, 1998: With more than 2,200 wolves now in Minnesota and hundreds in Wisconsin and Michigan's Upper Peninsula, U.S. Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt visits Minnesota to announce wolves had recovered from the brink of extinction and that the Clinton administration will act to remove wolves in the Great Lakes region from the federal endangered species list.

Feb. 8, 2007: After years of intra-agency and legal wrangling, the Fish and Wildlife Service publishes a final rule declaring wolves recovered in the Great Lakes “distinct population segment” and removing them from the federal endangered list. Minnesota estimates about 3,000 wolves in the state.

Sept. 29, 2008: Federal District Court in Washington, D.C. rules against delisting rule, putting Great Lakes wolves back on the endangered species list, saying the Fish and Wildlife Service failed to explain the legality of creating a distinct population segment only for a few states.

Dec. 28, 2011: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service moves again to delist Great Lakes region wolves to return management to states and tribes. Minnesota (and Wisconsin) immediately plan limited hunting and trapping seasons.

Fall/winter 2012: Minnesota hunters and trappers legally kill 413 wolves.

Fall/winter 2013: Minnesota hunters and trappers legally kill 238 wolves.

Fall/winter 2014: Minnesota hunters and trappers legally kill 272 wolves.

Dec. 19, 2014: Federal District Court in Washington, DC again nullifies Great Lakes wolf delisting, saying wolves had not yet recovered over a broad enough portion of their original range. Wolves immediately regain federal protections as endangered in Wisconsin and Michigan and threatened in Minnesota.

Aug. 1, 2017: Federal Appeals Court for the District of Columbia Circuit affirms the 2014 District Court decision declaring the delisting rule insufficient, cementing Endangered Species Act protections for Great Lakes wolves for the near future. The Minnesota DNR estimates about 2,856 wolves roam in the northern half of the state.

March 2019: Federal officials propose again delisting gray wolves across the contiguous U.S.

October 2020: In yet another effort to remove federal protections, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service publishes another rule for delisting wolves in the Lower 48 states, handing management over to state and tribal governments. Wolf supporters vow to fight the rule in court.