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Populations have rebounded in recent decades, but some scientists on the panel that evaluated the proposal said it was deeply flawed.

By Catrin Einhorn
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Gray wolves, one of the first animals shielded by the Endangered Species Act after Americans all but exterminated them in the lower 48 states, will no longer receive federal protection, officials announced Thursday.

"After more than 45 years as a listed species, the gray wolf has exceeded all conservation goals for recovery," Interior Secretary David Bernhardt said in a statement.

Environmentalists condemned the decision as dangerously premature and vowed to take the Fish and Wildlife Service back to court, where they have successfully blocked previous attempts to strip wolves of federal protections. "Wolves just occupy a fraction of their former range," said Jamie Rappaport Clark, president and chief executive of Defenders of Wildlife, an environmental group. "There's so much work that needs to be done."

The new rule will officially publish on Tuesday and become effective 60 days after that. Then, states and tribes will assume control of the nation's wolves, except for a subspecies called the Mexican wolf that remains under federal protection.

A gray wolf in Montana. By the mid-20th century they had nearly vanished from the lower 48 states. Credit Alan and Sandy Carey Nature Production, via Minden Pictures

It was the second time in recent years that the federal government had tried to take wolves off the endangered species list; the last attempt, under the Obama administration, was withdrawn amid strong opposition.

Thursday's decision came despite significant concerns raised by scientists who performed the independent review that is required before the Fish and Wildlife Service can delist a species. Four out of the five researchers charged with reviewing the proposal raised substantive concerns.

Interior Secretary David Bernhardt called the gray wolf's recovery "a milestone of success" at the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge near Bloomington, Minn., on Thursday.Credit... Jim Mone/Associated Press

"I thought it was critically flawed," said Carlos Carroll, an independent biologist with the Klamath Center for Conservation Research who said the Fish and Wildlife Service proposal, which is based on the consensus that wolves now face a low risk of extinction, ignored the importance of genetic variation in species.

That variation will be critical to allowing the animals to adapt to future threats like climate change, Dr. Carroll said, and is essential for their long-term survival. "That is the building block of their ability to persist," he said.

Another reviewer, Adrian Treves, a professor of environmental studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, said he was troubled that the Fish and Wildlife Service seemed to disregard his concerns that the proposal did not accurately estimate how many wolves would be killed by people.

"I predict that the consequence of the inaccurate risk assessment is that gray wolves are not secure in the Western Great Lakes," he wrote last month in a follow-up memo to the federal Office of Management and Budget, "and the federal government will have to relist them again, either by federal court mandate or after another wolf population crash." Dr. Carroll and Dr. Treves are also co-authors of an article published Wednesday in the journal BioScience rebutting the Fish and Wildlife Service's argument for delisting wolves.

Officials said the 442-page final ruling, made public on Thursday, had taken into account the concerns in the peer review but gave few details. Dr. Carroll did not agree. “If the service had seriously addressed the issues we raised, they couldn’t have come to the same conclusion,” he said.

Before the arrival of Europeans, wolves flourished from coast to coast in North America, living in forests, prairies, mountains and wetlands. After two centuries of eradication campaigns — the colonial authorities, then states and eventually the federal government paid bounties for dead wolves — the animals had all but vanished. By the mid-20th century, perhaps 1,000 were left in the lower 48 states, mainly in northern Minnesota.

Wolves’ numbers began to rebound after they were placed under federal protection in the 1960s, and in the mid-1990s, the Service took a bold new step, relocating 31 wolves from Canada into Yellowstone National Park. They multiplied quickly, and now about 6,000 wolves range the western Great Lakes and Northern Rocky Mountains, with small numbers spreading into Oregon, Washington and California.

But with their recovery came old conflicts. Ranchers complained of lost livestock, hunters of decreased deer and elk.

The matter is complicated by a fundamental disagreement over the extent of the Endangered Species Act’s scope: Must it simply save animals from the risk of extinction in the wild, or must it restore them until they occupy an environmentally significant role in their ecosystems?

“There’s little federal guidance on this question and no state-level goals for what ecological outcomes should look like,” said Ya-Wei Li of the Environmental Policy Innovation Center. “As a result, people on both sides of the issue continue to wrestle over ‘how much is enough’ conservation under the Act.”

Because wolves are not in immediate danger of extinction in the lower 48 states and are even spreading into new habitats, Mr. Li said the government should focus its resources on hundreds of species that are far more imperiled.

But other advocates and scientists point to the ripple effects of restoring top predators to an ecosystem. Wolves, for example, help new trees and other critical vegetation grow by reducing deer and elk grazing. A healthier habitat supports myriad species.

“Wolves shape the places where they live,” said Collette Adkins, carnivore conservation director at the Center for Biological Diversity. “There are so many places where they lived before and can thrive again.”

Despite Thursday’s ruling, Colorado could be the next place where wolves make a comeback. A groundbreaking question on the ballot in Tuesday’s election will let voters decide whether to reintroduce wolves to the state.

“You have wolf lovers and wolf haters,” said Jon T. Coleman, a historian at the University of Notre Dame who has written about the relationship between wolves and people in America. The controversy protects the species, he said, but also limits progress.

“Everybody backs into their camps,” he said.