

# San Francisco Chronicle

## Gray wolf loses endangered species protection, latest Trump move to weaken environmental laws

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Oct. 29, 2020

The gray wolf, celebrated as one of the greatest conservation success stories in U.S. history, will lose endangered species protections, the Trump administration announced Thursday.

The widely expected announcement, made by Interior Secretary David Bernhardt, attests to the rising numbers of the storied predator, but it's also setting off concern that the animal is not ready for the change and that wolf populations could perish in some parts of the West, including California.

Nearly wiped out by hunters and trappers in the lower 48 states, wolves made significant inroads after federal safeguards were enacted in the 1970s. The large, steely-eyed canines now thrive in parts of the northern Rockies and Great Lakes region, numbering over 6,000 across the contiguous United States. In much of their territory, however, packs remain thin, including California where just 14 wolves are known to roam today.



Gray wolf OR-54 was born to the famous wolf OR-7, who was the first wild wolf known to have entered California in 100 years. OR-54 was ...Photo: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

The move by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to lift federal protections, allowing states to reclassify the animal as game or permit kills to protect livestock, could blunt emerging wolf populations and undo a half century of progress, scientists and conservation groups say.

"This will be the end of the recovery," said Amaroq Weiss, a biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity who works on wolf conservation on the West Coast.

The decision is the latest in a long line of bids by the Trump administration to weaken environmental laws in deference to commercial interests.

This rollback, though, is unusually visceral as the target is an enduring emblem of the American wilderness. The gray wolf, a highly social and sometimes fierce predator, looms large in the continent's history and folklore and, in 1974, was one of the first species protected under the Endangered Species Act.

The wolf's reputation is not universally revered, however, and ranchers and other rural residents who are concerned about the carnivore's ability to poach cattle and sheep stand to benefit from the deregulation.

The California Farm Bureau Federation and the California Cattlemen's Association have been particularly outspoken about problems with wolves and the need to drop protections.

Under the new regulatory action, the gray wolf loses all status under the federal Endangered Species Act in the 48 contiguous states with the exception of a subspecies of gray wolf known as the Mexican wolf in the Southwest.

Already, Congress has removed endangered and threatened classifications for gray wolves in parts of the country where their numbers are greatest.

The result of Thursday's delisting is that each state now decides how to manage wolf populations, including whether to allow hunting and kills for livestock protection and at what numbers.

The action is scheduled to be filed on the Federal Register, where new rules are posted, on Tuesday and will take effect after 60 days.

In California, state law will continue to safeguard the gray wolf, but wildlife experts say this accomplishes only so much. California's wolves, like wolves elsewhere, migrate from other states, and if there are fewer in other states, California's population also languishes.

"It's a fundamental principal of nature," Weiss said. "The wolves need to be able to disperse safely to regions where there's suitable habitat and form new packs."

The first wolf to appear in California since they were eradicated in the state the 1920s came from Oregon. It was spotted in 2011.

The wolf, known as OR-7 because of the code used to track it, was reported missing earlier this year and is now presumed dead. But one of its pups cavorted with other Oregon wolves to give rise to the Lassen Pack in Lassen and Plumas counties. It's the lone group living in California today.

State protections for gray wolves in Oregon, where the eastern third of the state was already without federal endangered species rules, are not as stringent as in California. When state law replaces federal laws for the rest of the state, conservationists worry that California will lose its primary source of new wolves.

Conservation groups, including the Center for Biological Diversity, are vowing to mount a legal challenge to the administration's action. Previous efforts to remove the animal from the endangered species list, including one in 2013, were stymied by the courts.