

THE SACRAMENTO BEE

Trump removes gray wolf from endangered species list. What that means for California

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The Trump administration's announcement Thursday that it was removing gray wolves from U.S. Endangered Species Act protections will have significant impacts in California — including its ability to track the species as its population grows and criminally charge people who kill the wild animals.

In California, wolves were protected under the state's Endangered Species Act after they began to wander into the state in 2011 from packs elsewhere in the West. The decision Thursday by the U.S. Department of Interior to "delist" the gray wolf from the federal Endangered Species Act weakens California's efforts to manage its small but growing population.

Since 2016, California's wildlife agency has received \$1 million in federal funds to help pay for its wolf-monitoring program. That helps fund biologists to monitor the state's single wolf pack in Lassen and Plumas counties and to track random wolves that wander into the state from time to time from Oregon, Washington and Idaho. The money also goes to programs intended to reduce conflicts between ranchers and wolves.

In addition to putting federal funding at risk, the loss of federal protections greatly hinders the ability of local prosecutors to charge a poacher with felonies, which include hefty fines and possible prison time. Environmentalists warn that may encourage more killing of wolves in California.

Under the California Endangered Species Act, the penalties top out at six months in jail. This is significant since three wolves have died in California under suspicious circumstances in recent years.

In late 2018, someone shot a GPS-collared wolf that had recently wandered from Oregon into Modoc County. No arrests have been made in that case, despite the federal government and an environmental group offering a combined \$7,500 reward.

California wildlife officials say that two other suspicious wolf deaths remain under investigation. In September 2018, a yearling female from the Lassen Pack was found dead, and another wolf, known as OR 54, died in Shasta County in February after making an 8,700-mile meandering journey through three states looking for a mate.

In both cases, state wildlife officials declined to provide details about the deaths, though they said wildlife officers take “very seriously any threats to this recovering wolf population,” and the state “fully investigates any possible criminal activity.”

The removal of the federal protections makes it less likely for anyone to ever be charged in those wolf deaths.

Time running out to charge poachers

State prosecutors have a three-year window to bring felony animal cruelty charges, but under the state Endangered Species Act, prosecutors must file charges within a year of the crime occurring.

That window has already closed on the Modoc County wolf shooting case as well as the September 2018 death of the Lassen yearling.

The statute of limitations under the federal Endangered Species Act is five years, but with wolves delisted, environmental groups say it will make it much harder to convince federal prosecutors to pursue cases against wolf poachers who killed wolves prior to them losing protections.

Already, wolf advocates say federal prosecutors rarely pursue criminal charges against wolf poachers unless the suspect admitted to intentionally targeting a protected wolf.

“If they’re delisted, I would be shocked if the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service” brought charges against a poacher, said Collette Adkins, an attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity, which plans to challenge the Trump administration rule in court.

California isn’t the only state to have poaching investigations that could be hindered by the Trump administration’s new rule.

In Oregon and Washington, there are at least 31 cases in which wolves died under suspicious circumstances since 2015, but no charges were filed, said Amaroq Weiss of the Center for Biological Diversity.

Ranchers applaud move

Lassen County Supervisor Aaron Albaugh, who has a cattle ranch, said removing wolves from the federal protections could make it more difficult to secure funding for programs that ranchers support such as creating a fund to reimburse ranchers for livestock that wolves kill.

But, otherwise, the Trump administration’s proposal is good news for ranchers, he said.

“At least we won’t have the federal side of it, but we’ll still have to fight and argue with the state on the state side of things,” he said.

On a background call with reporters Thursday, an U.S. Interior Department spokesman insisted the action was based on “the best scientific data available.”

“The finding of our review is clear ... the gray wolf has recovered,” the spokesman said. He called the wolf recovery “one of the great conservation successes.”

California officials, however, said the state’s small population of wolves needs federal protections.

“We believe it’s an amazing ecological story that wolves returned to their historic habitat in our state and have re-established elsewhere in the West, but California’s fledgling population still remains vulnerable,” Jordan Traverso, a spokeswoman for the Department of Fish and Wildlife, said in an email.

In the years since the first wolf wandered into California from Oregon in 2011, at least 30 wolves have either passed through, settled or been born in the remote, five-county region about the size of West Virginia in California’s northeastern corner.

While animal lovers in California celebrated the wolves’ arrival, ranchers in the newly reclaimed wolf territory argue they should have the ability to kill problem wolves that habitually prey on their livestock.

Since wolves returned to California, there have been at least 20 confirmed or probable cases of wolves attacking livestock.

Unlike some other states, California doesn’t reimburse ranchers for the animals that wolves kill.