

Trump administration removes gray wolves from federal Endangered Species Act protection

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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced Thursday it was removing gray wolves from Endangered Species Act protection across the Lower 48 states, a move cheered by ranchers and bemoaned by environmentalists.

Interior Secretary David Bernhardt declared the gray wolf's recovery "a milestone of success" during an announcement attended by several dozen people at a national wildlife refuge overlooking the Minnesota River in a rural area outside Minneapolis.

"In the early part of the 20th century the gray wolf had essentially become a ghost throughout the United States," Bernhardt said. "That is not the case today."



Two wolves from the Walla Walla pack in Umatilla County in 2017. (Photo: ODFW)

The gray wolf has rebounded to a population of more than 6,000.

First proposed by the Trump Administration in June 2018 and formally announced in March 2019, the decision to delist the iconic quadruped will give states wide authority to decide how to handle a predator that's become as controversial as spotted owls in Oregon. The decision exempts a small population of Mexican gray wolves in Arizona and New Mexico.

Once found nationwide, gray wolves were hunted, trapped, and poisoned for decades. By 1967, there were fewer than 1,000 wolves, most of them in one small part of the Midwest. In 1978, they were declared endangered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The move makes it possible to kill wolves that chronically attack livestock in the western two-thirds of Oregon, where the animals were previously shielded by the federal law. But overall, the delisting isn't expected to have a major impact on the state's 150 to 200 wolves because they've already been managed by the Oregon Wolf Plan — and that will continue.

“We have a wolf recovery plan that is based on science,” said Charles Boyle, a spokesman for Oregon Gov. Kate Brown. “That plan is working well, compensating ranchers who lose animals while helping to restore the full biodiversity of Oregon.”

More than 2,000 occupy six states in the Northern Rockies and Pacific Northwest after wolves from Canada were reintroduced in Idaho and Yellowstone National Park beginning 25 years ago.

Federal protections were already removed for wolves in eastern Oregon, Montana, Wyoming and Idaho by 2012. Oregon removed wolves from the state endangered species list in 2015.

This action is more sweeping, and according to the Fish and Wildlife Service represents a success story that's seen wolf populations return to robust levels across the country, the Fish and Wildlife Service said.

Wolf advocates said that while populations may have rebounded in the midwest and Great Lakes region, it isn't true in western states such as Oregon.

“Given that gray wolves in the lower 48 states occupy a fraction of their historical and currently available habitat, the Fish and Wildlife

Service determining they are successfully recovered does not pass the straight-face test,” said John Mellgren, an attorney with the Western Environmental Law Center. “On its face, this appears to be politically motivated.”

Environmental groups have promised legal action opposing the decisions.

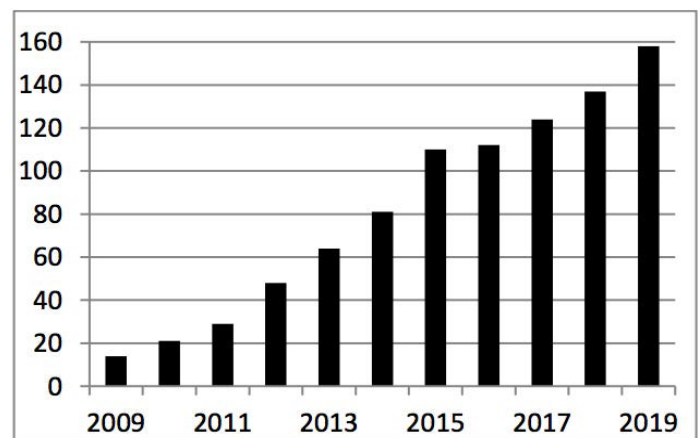
Oregon removed wolves from the state endangered species act protection in 2015. The state crafted its own plan for wolf management in 2005 and updated it in 2019.

Oregon home to at least 150 to 200 wolves

Wolves began re-establishing a population in Oregon after crossing in from Idaho, where they were reintroduced in 1995.

Wolves, which had been largely wiped out in Oregon by the 1940s, slowly began establishing a population in the early 2000s. Led by trailblazing wolf OR-7, they began making inroads on the west side of the state.

The latest count indicated a minimum of 157 wolves reside in Oregon. The vast majority are clustered in northeastern Oregon, but that has been changing in recent years.



The number of wolves in Oregon has been gradually rising. (Photo: ODFW)

“We’re gradually seeing more wolves in the Cascade Range coming in from the northeast, to the point that we’re expecting to see them just about everywhere in the state in coming years,” Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife carnivore coordinator Derek Broman said. “The good news is that even as the number of wolves has increased, we haven’t seen an increasing rate of conflict with livestock.”

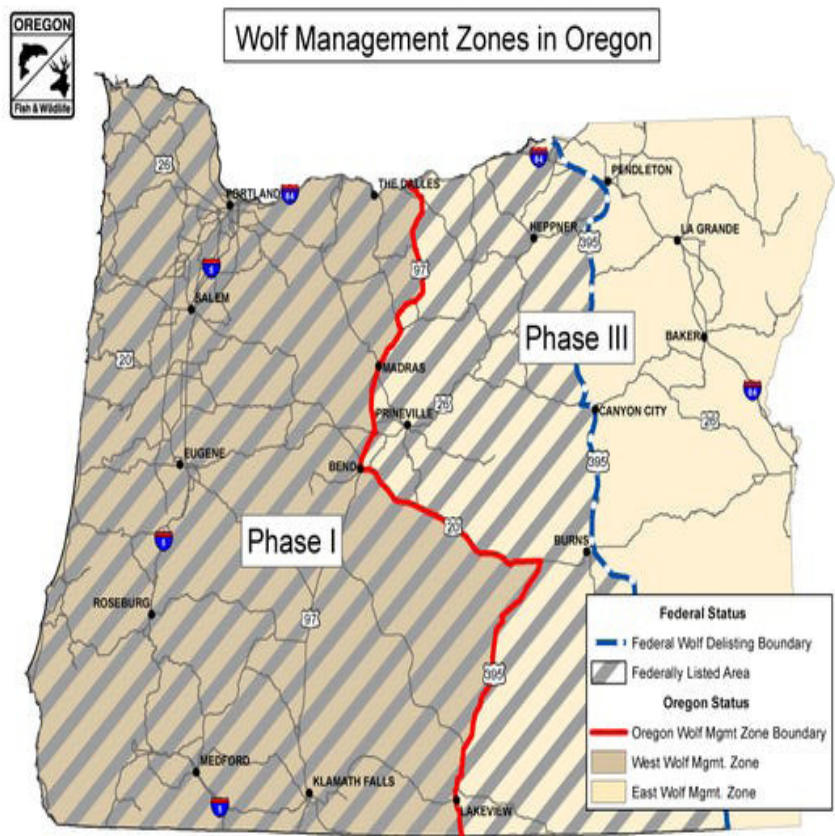
The Oregon Cattlemen’s Association applauded the decision, saying it removed unneeded bureaucracy.

“This action will remove an unnecessary layer of management that has prevented responsible management for many years,” the group said in a statement.

Broman said the biggest change was that wolves in the western two-thirds of Oregon, previously protected by the federal ESA, will lose that protection. The federal ESA made it illegal to kill a wolf for any reason.

Without that blanket protection, lethal removal will become possible under Oregon’s wolf plan, Broman said. Wolves west of the Cascades, for example, will be managed under “phase I” of the wolf plan. That will make it possible, but unlikely, that wolves would be lethally removed for attacking livestock.

A map showing where wolves were previously protected under the federal Endangered Species Act. Those protections were removed Thursday. (Photo: Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife)



“There are a lot of requirements before we’d move to lethal removal and even if a pack did meet the criteria, we’re not forced into doing it automatically,” Broman said.

However, wolves in the central part of the state — between Bend and Burns — that are now managed under “phase III” of the plan could be killed more easily for livestock depredation, Broman said.

That would apply to the Heppner and Five Points pack just west of Highway 395.

Currently, ranchers have the authority to shoot a wolf caught in the act of biting, wounding, killing or chasing livestock in certain circumstances in some parts of the state.

“The additional allowance for killing of wolves across the entire state may impact the reestablishment of more wolves in the remaining suitable habitat,” said Amaroq Weiss, senior West Coast wolf advocate for the Center for Biological Diversity. “Wolves in Oregon currently occupy a little more than 12% of identified suitable habitat, and their current numbers of around 158 wolves is just a little more than 10 percent of what scientific studies show the state could support. It has taken 21 years to get from zero wolves in Oregon to 158, and the only way that has even happened has been due to legal protections.”

“This is no ‘Mission Accomplished’ moment for wolf recovery,” said Kristen Boyles, attorney for the Earthjustice. “Wolves are only starting to get a toehold in places like Northern California and the Pacific Northwest, and wolves need federal protection to explore habitat in the Southern Rockies and the Northeast. This delisting decision is what happens when bad science drives bad policy – and it’s illegal, so we will see them in court.”

The Fish and Wildlife Service said it based its final determination “solely on the best scientific and commercial data available, a thorough analysis of threats and how they have been alleviated and the ongoing commitment and proven track record of states and tribes to continue managing for healthy wolf populations once delisted.”

In total, the gray wolf population in the lower 48 states is more than 6,000 wolves, greatly exceeding the combined recovery goals for the Northern Rocky Mountains and Western Great Lakes populations, according to the agency.