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Wisconsin judge orders start to wolf hunt this month

Associated Press

February 11, 2021 — 4:05pm

JEFFERSON, Wis. — A Wisconsin judge ordered the state Department of Natural Resources on Thursday to start a gray wolf hunt this month rather than waiting until November.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service removed wolves in the Lower 48 states from the federal endangered species list in January, returning management to the states. The move was among Trump administration actions on the environment that President Joe Biden has ordered reviewed.

Wisconsin law mandates the DNR run a wolf season from November through February. The department had planned to start the season this November but Republican legislators demanded the department start the season immediately.

DNR officials resisted, saying they need time to develop quotas. The department's policy board refused to order an immediate hunt, noting that Wisconsin's Chippewa tribes haven't been consulted as per treaty requirements. The Chippewa consider wolves sacred and oppose hunting them.

Kansas-based hunter advocacy group Hunter Nation sued the Wisconsin DNR this month, seeking an order to start the season immediately.

Online court records show Jefferson County Circuit Judge Bennett Brantmeier ordered the DNR on Thursday to hold the season this month. The records don't include Brantmeier's rationale beyond a notation that he's directing the DNR to "follow their duty to hold the Gray Wolf hunting season in February 2021."

Asked if the DNR would appeal the decision, department spokeswoman Sarah Hoyer said in an email that state attorneys were reviewing the ruling but the agency will be "taking steps to implement the court's order." She didn't elaborate.

"This ruling is such a disappointment for Wisconsin's wolves and all who believe that science, not bullets, should drive wolf management," said Collette Adkins of the Center for Biological Diversity, one of six environmental groups suing to overturn the federal action.

"Trophy hunters wasted no time in pushing for this wolf hunt in the middle of the wolf breeding season, against the advice of state experts, and without consultation with regional tribes," Adkins said. "We will continue our fight to stop the hunt."

Minnesota and Michigan are the other states in the western Great Lakes region with wolf populations. Officials there also will decide whether to allow hunts.