

Wolves lose protection under Endangered Species Act

by Suzanne Stone

Premature delisting severely threatens continued existence of the northern Rockies gray wolf.

WASHINGTON - Today the Bush administration finalized its controversial decision to remove the northern Rockies gray wolf from the list of species protected under the Endangered Species Act. The delisting will take effect 30 days after the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) publishes the final rule in the Federal Register next week.

The removal of federal protections for the gray wolf puts its continued survival in the northern Rockies at the mercy of the woefully insufficient state management plans developed by Wyoming, Idaho and -- to a lesser extent -- Montana. These plans call for dramatic reductions in wolf populations in the region.

"We will support delisting of the northern Rockies wolf when the states establish sustainable management plans that ensure viable, interconnected wolf populations throughout the region," said Rodger Schlickeisen, president of Defenders of Wildlife. "Unfortunately, the current state plans seem designed to lead only to the dramatic decline and need for quick relisting of the wolf. That's not in anyone's best interest."

Before a species can be delisted, FWS must determine that it does not face continued threats that could undermine the species' survival. This criterion is not met under the state management plans which ignore scientific estimates that, for species to remain viable, there should be several thousand individuals, and wolf populations in the northern Rockies must be interconnected with larger wolf populations in Canada. With no federal protections in place, existing state management plans would permit wolf populations in the northern Rockies to be drastically reduced by as much as 70 percent, and eliminate any likelihood of establishing connections with Canadian wolf populations or promoting the establishment of wolf populations in other states such as Oregon, Washington, Utah, and Colorado.

"Given the tremendous public support and resources spent to reintroduce the wolf to the northern Rockies, it makes no sense to allow wholesale killing of wolves in the region and polarize the issue even more deeply with this one-sided plan," said Suzanne Stone, northern Rockies wolf conservation specialist for Defenders of Wildlife. "Instead we need a balanced solution based on science that also addresses the needs of ranchers, wildlife supporters, and hunters."

Defenders of Wildlife recently joined with the Natural Resources Defense Council in petitioning FWS to develop a national recovery plan for wolves in the United States, with regional recovery goals aimed at supporting sustainable populations of wolves in the northern Rockies, the northeast and the southwest.

Background:

More than 200,000 gray wolves (*Canis lupus*) once lived throughout the United States. Aggressive wildlife killing campaigns led to wolf eradication from most of the country by the mid-1930s. Gray wolves have been listed as endangered since 1974, and were reintroduced to Yellowstone National Park and Central Idaho in 1995 and 1996.

Wolves are native to the northern Rockies and have begun once again to restore natural balance to the areas they are reoccupying, by culling weak and diseased elk, deer, and other prey, and dispersing elk more widely across their habitat and away from sensitive wetlands and meadows that suffer from overbrowsing. Elk populations still remain high, (more than 400,000 elk are present today in the region) and hunter harvest success remains as high as it was prior to the return of wolves. Ranchers are also successfully learning to reduce the limited wolf predation on livestock to manageable levels and are compensated for most known losses that do occur by Defenders or state compensation programs. Wolf-related tourism in the Yellowstone region has generated more than \$35 million annually for local communities.

Defenders of Wildlife is dedicated to the protection of all native animals and plants in their natural communities. With more than 1 million members and activists, Defenders of Wildlife is a leading advocate for innovative solutions to safeguard our wildlife heritage for generations to come.

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