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State-Sponsored Wolf Killing Ends in Idaho

Faced with looming court challenge, Idaho halts unprecedented program

Faced with a looming deadline to defend its actions before a federal appeals court, the Idaho Department of Fish and Game (IDFG) announced this afternoon that it is halting its wolf extermination program in the Middle Fork region of the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness as of today.

The announcement represents a stay of execution for the remaining wolves that constitute the Golden Creek and Monumental Creek wolf packs, which inhabit the Middle Fork region. To date, nine wolves from the two packs have been killed by IDFG's hired hunter-trapper, who entered the wilderness and began his wolf extermination program in mid-December. It is unknown how many wolves remain in the two packs.

"IDFG's hunter-trapper killed nine wolves and we are happy to report that the rest no longer face the same threat," said Earthjustice attorney Tim Preso. "We are sorry it took an emergency injunction request to the court of appeals to get Idaho to halt this illegal program, and we hope that the federal government in the future will take more seriously its public trust responsibility to protect the wilderness from state efforts to exterminate native wildlife."

IDFG's action comes in the midst of an emergency proceeding before the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit in which conservationists were seeking an injunction to halt the wolf extermination program. The conservationists, represented by Earthjustice, sued IDFG and the U.S. Forest Service earlier this month, arguing that the state wolf extermination program would degrade the largest forested wilderness in the lower-48 states. After a federal judge in Idaho rejected a request to stop the program on January 17, the conservationists took their fight to the court of appeals, where they filed an emergency request for an injunction on January 23.

IDFG is halting trapping in the Middle Fork starting today and the trapper will take a few days to remove traps and snares from the area. Additional trapping in the area will cease, at least through the end of the state fiscal year, which is June 30.

In mid-December 2013, IDFG hired a hunter-trapper to pack into central Idaho's 2.4-million-acre Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness to eradicate two wolf packs, the Golden and Monumental packs, in the interest of inflating elk populations for outfitters and recreational hunters. The U.S. Forest Service, which administers the wilderness, approved the extermination program by authorizing use of a Forest Service cabin and airstrip to support wolf extermination activities.

The region of the Frank Church Wilderness where IDFG's hunter-trapper was killing wolves is a remote area around Big Creek and the Middle Fork of the Salmon River. Even though this region hosts one of the lightest densities of hunters in the state, IDFG prioritized elk production over protection of the area's wilderness character. The Forest Service failed to object to IDFG's plans and instead actively assisted them.

"This gives the Forest Service the opportunity to realize its mistake and never approve this kind of proposal again. The Forest Service is responsible for preserving wilderness character in the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness and wild wolves are an integral part of Wilderness," stated Gary Macfarlane, Board member of Wilderness Watch.

Earthjustice represented long-time Idaho conservationist and wilderness advocate Ralph Maughan along with four conservation groups—Defenders of Wildlife, Western Watersheds Project, Wilderness Watch, and the Center for Biological Diversity—in the lawsuit challenging the wolf extermination program.