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Conservation Groups Initiate Legal Action Against Feds for Failing to Protect Wolves

BOISE, IDAHO—Today, 10 conservation groups filed their 60-day [notice of intent to sue](#) the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (“the Service”) for its failure to list western wolves under the Endangered Species Act. The groups outlined the reasons why the Service’s “not warranted” finding, formally [published in today’s Federal Register](#), ignores obvious threats to the species, runs contrary to the best available science, and relies on flawed population models for its determination.

“The current killing regimes in Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming put wolves at obvious risk of extinction in the foreseeable future, and this core population is key to wolf survival in the West,” said Erik Molvar, a wildlife biologist and executive director of Western Watersheds Project. “Even if the states’ population estimates were defensible—and they aren’t, according to recent scientific analyses—the feds are underestimating the extinction agendas of anti-wolf state governments and the small and tentative state of recovering wolf populations elsewhere in the West.”

The finding confirms that a western U.S. distinct population segment, or “DPS,” is a valid entity for listing consideration, but then argues on the basis of a modeling exercise that there is no risk of extinction for wolves in the West either now or in the foreseeable future.

“The Service’s finding seems to give the green light for states hostile to wolves to follow suit with Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming’s aggressive killing regimes if they are eventually delisted and transferred to state management West wide,” said Kelly Nokes, an attorney with the Western Environmental Law Center representing the groups. “But wolves have yet to recover across vast portions of the West, and they exist in only small populations in the West Coast and Colorado habitats they are slowly reinhabiting. We will continue to fight for the protections this iconic species needs to be rightfully restored across the West’s wild landscape—protections that some states have shown only the Endangered Species Act can really provide.”

“The Biden administration has once again let down wolves and those Americans who care about them,” stated George Nickas, executive director of Wilderness Watch. “It has rejected every request to step forward when states like Idaho, Wyoming, and Montana have implemented egregiously cruel and inhumane wolf eradication plans. Idaho proposes to kill 90 percent of its wilderness wolves, and that doesn’t alarm the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service? It seems that like their state counterparts, federal officials have lost all reverence or respect for these iconic wilderness animals. It’s really a sad day.”

At present, wolf populations in California and the Cascade Range of western Oregon and Washington are far below minimum viable population thresholds, and Utah, Nevada, and northern Arizona, all of which have historic gray wolf habitat, have no wolves at all.

In 2023, a study by wolf geneticist Dr. Bridgett vonHoldt and others found that [wolf populations in the northern Rockies are losing genetic variability](#) and below genetic minimum viable population levels at today's populations.

"Idaho, Montana and Wyoming have become the poster children for what happens when politics trumps science," said Brooks Fahy, executive director of Predator Defense. "They are cruelly driving wolves in the northern Rockies to extinction via wanton shooting, trapping, snaring, even driving over them with a snowmobile. Science shows us the importance of intact pack structures. Each family member has a vital role to play and they grieve each loss."

A [second 2023 study](#) by Dr. Robert Crabtree and others found that the Montana state population model was badly biased, overestimating total wolf populations by as much as 50 percent. These researchers found that this flawed population model constitutes a "precariously misleading situation for decision-makers that threatens wolf populations." In an earlier analysis, Dr. Scott Creel [found that data](#) input into both the Idaho and Montana population models violate the assumptions of the models, meaning that population estimations generated by the models are unreliable. Yet the Service relied on these flawed population estimates in concluding that wolves in the West are not at risk of extinction.

"The public trusts the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to be the backstop for imperiled species like the gray wolf," said Lizzy Pennock, carnivore coexistence attorney at WildEarth Guardians. "The Service has an obligation to rely on the best available science in decision-making and should have seen through Montana's use of flawed population modeling, not heedlessly accepted it as true. We deserve better from this agency."

"It's deeply concerning to hear that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has decided not to list gray wolves, a sacred species to Native Americans in the western U.S. under the Endangered Species Act, while ignoring traditional sacred religious beliefs of traditional Native Americans," said Roger Dobson with Protect The Wolves. "It's important to protect these intelligent and family-oriented predators to maintain ecosystem health, and to protect Native American sacred religious beliefs. Hopefully, the Service will take steps to address the problems with their determination before it's too late for these native wildlife species, before violating Indigenous religious beliefs."

"The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service committed to 'immediately pursue' emergency Endangered Species Act listing of wolves if any state allowed unlimited and unregulated killing of wolves, which Idaho has done since July 1, 2021," said Suzanne Asha Stone, director of the Idaho-based International Wildlife Coexistence Network. "The Service has failed to honor its delisting plan just as the state of Idaho has failed to manage wolves 'like mountain lions and black bears' as they publicly swore to do before wolf delisting. Aerial gunning of animals, killing pups for bounties, and widespread traps and deadly snares have no place in responsible wildlife management today."

"The Service acknowledged the unethical and unfair chase means and measures that are slaughtering wolves in Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming, but just gave them a get out of jail free card for it to continue and worsen," said KC York, president and founder of Trap Free Montana.

“Furthermore, they base their dreadful decision on flawed population models overestimating wolf numbers and ignore research warning of the wolves in the region’s genetic decline.”

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