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Feds find western wolves unworthy of Endangered Species Act protection; conservation groups prepare for legal action

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (“Service”) announced today that it will not list gray wolves in the western U.S. under the Endangered Species Act (“ESA”) finding them “not warranted” for federal protection. Today’s decision will allow Wyoming, Idaho, and Montana to continue their widespread killing of these intelligent, family-oriented native wildlife. Conservation groups are looking carefully at today’s notice and evaluating legal options.

“A handful of states are standing in the way of wolf recovery nationwide, espousing an outdated, anti-science, eradication mindset,” said Kelly Nokes, attorney with the Western Environmental Law Center. “Aggressive state policies promoting wolf killing in the northern Rockies states especially, are primitive relics that must change for wolves to reestablish their rightful place in the wild. The scientific community agrees wolf recovery is necessary for healthy western landscapes, and providing protections afforded by the Endangered Species Act is an essential way to make sure that happens.”

Today’s decision responds to a petition to list the western U.S. population of the gray wolf submitted by 70 conservation groups in July 2021, after Idaho and Montana passed new laws to promote wolf killing. Since that time, hundreds of wolves have been killed each year in the core of the species’ range in Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming, diminishing population health.

“Wolves aren’t a political football, they are a native wildlife species key to balancing ecosystem health,” said Erik Molvar, executive director of Western Watersheds Project. “It is obvious that wolves don’t have adequate regulatory mechanisms to protect them in Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming, where they are being targeted for extermination by state governments. The Biden administration had the opportunity to follow the science and the law, and ensure real recovery for the species. This is beyond disappointing.”

In 2011, Congress legislatively stripped wolves in the western U.S., primarily in Idaho, Wyoming, and Montana, of their endangered species protections, giving states management authority. However, the Service has the authority to relist the population if it finds the population currently meets the definition for a threatened or endangered species under the Endangered Species Act.

“Time and again, wolves keep serving as martyrs for political compromise and capitulation to bad-faith actors.” noted George Nickas, executive director at Wilderness Watch. “As martyrs, they die in service of this charade. The administration’s lack of courage to rise above politics and protect the lives of these animals—as the law requires—is unconscionable.”

“Wolf populations are being destroyed by overzealous anti-wolf state officials. They brought back bounties on wolves and their young, unlimited trapping, snaring and hunting, and even aerial gunning of entire packs,” said Suzanne Asha Stone, director of the Idaho based

International Wildlife Coexistence Network. “Today’s decision clears the way for states like Idaho to finish the job and kill them all. We have to ask the Biden administration: why did the American people bring wolf populations back only to see them decimated from the landscape just a few decades later?”

“It’s concerning to hear that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has decided not to list gray wolves in the western U.S. under the Endangered Species Act while ignoring Traditional Sacred Beliefs of 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 protect Native American Sacred beliefs. Hopefully, the agency will take steps to address the problems with their determination before it’s too late for these native wildlife species.”

“The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has failed in its role to protect the wolf in the northern Rockies for present and future generations,” said KC York, president and founder of Trap Free Montana. “The egregious, aggressive, and lax wolf regulations are easily destroying alpha pairs, juveniles, pups, dispersers for vital genetic exchange, and entire packs, wreaking havoc on their critically necessary social system and disrupting their ability to survive into the future and expand into their historic range.”

“Tragically, the wolf has become a pawn in a well-orchestrated campaign of disinformation,” said Brooks Fahy, executive director of Predator Defense. “And Idaho, Montana and Wyoming have become the poster children for what happens when politics trumps science. What they are doing to wolves—wantonly shooting, trapping and snaring them or driving over them with a snowmobile—can only be described as animal torture. Science shows us the importance of intact pack structures. Each family member has a vital role to play and they grieve each loss.”

“How much worse must so-called wolf ‘management’ policies be in the Northern Rocky Mountain states in order for the federal government to take action?” asked Lizzy Pennock, carnivore coexistence attorney at WildEarth Guardians. “With this decision, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has failed wolves, and has failed future generations of people who may never have the opportunity to hear a wolf howl.”

“Wolves play a key role in keeping ecosystems healthy by targeting diseased animals including deer and elk with chronic wasting disease,” said Mike Garrity, executive director of Alliance for the Wild Rockies. “Unfortunately, the states’, in the Northern Rockies, wolf management plans are nothing more than extinction plans.”

“This decision is a serious loss, not just for wolves, but American wildlife,” said Paul Busch, membership director for Friends of the Clearwater. If Idaho and Montana’s state legislators cannot meet their obligation to manage wolves ethically, then federal intervention is clearly necessary. One wonders what other states will do now that they know that federal agencies have no interest in enforcing the law.”

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