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Western wolf coalition challenges nationwide wolf delisting

Today, a coalition of Western wolf advocates [challenged](#) the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's decision to prematurely strip wolves of federal protections in the contiguous 48 states, in violation of the Endangered Species Act.

The most recent data from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and its state partners show an estimated 4,400 wolves inhabit the western Great Lakes states, but only 108 wolves in Washington state (with only 20 outside of eastern Washington), 158 in Oregon (with only 16 outside of northeastern Oregon), and a scant 15 exist in California. Nevada, Utah, and Colorado have had a few wolf sightings over the past three years, but wolves remain functionally absent from their historical habitat in these states.

"Wolves are a keystone species whose presence on landscapes regulates animal populations and improves ecosystem health – something the Service has acknowledged for at least 44 years," said **Kelly Nokes, Western Environmental Law Center attorney**. "Allowing people to kill wolves in Idaho, Wyoming, and Montana has already stunted recovery in those states. Applying this same death sentence to wolves throughout the contiguous U.S. would nationalize these negative effects, with potentially catastrophic ripple effects on ecosystems where wolves have yet to fully recover."

In delisting wolves, the Service ignored the science showing they are not recovered in the West. The Service concluded that because in its belief there are sufficient wolves in the Great Lakes states, it does not matter that wolves in the West are not yet recovered. The Endangered Species Act demands more, including restoring the species in the ample suitable habitats afforded by the wild public lands throughout the West. Indeed, wolves are listed as endangered under state laws in Washington and California, and wolves only occupy a small portion of available, suitable habitat in Oregon. Likewise, wolves have only just begun to recolonize their historical, wild, public lands habitat in much of the West, including in Colorado and the southern Rockies.

"From a scientific standpoint, wolves are nowhere near being recovered in the western United States," said **Erik Molvar, a wildlife biologist and executive director with Western Watersheds Project**. "The federal government has the obligation to keep wolves protected until robust and secure populations are in place throughout the West, and we intend to ensure that wolves get the legal defense they need against premature delisting."

"We have seen what happens when 'management' of wolves is returned to hostile state wildlife agencies disinterested in maintaining robust, stable, and genetically diverse wolf populations," said **Lindsay Larris, Wildlife Program director at WildEarth Guardians**. "Idaho, which allows an individual to kill up to 30 wolves

annually, saw the slaughter of nearly 600 wolves and wolf pups in a recent 12-month period and now other states are gearing up to allow wolf hunting and trapping this fall. Returning this type of unscientific and barbaric 'management' to states at this early juncture would spell disaster for true gray wolf recovery, plain and simple.”

The conservation groups have long been active on wolf recovery issues in the American West, including working with Western states to develop science-based wolf management plans, mounting cases to rein in rogue federal government wolf-killing programs, promoting recovery efforts in the Southwest for critically imperiled Mexican gray wolves, and working with local governments and landowners to deploy non-lethal tools that prevent wolf-livestock conflicts.

“With only a handful of wolves in California, western Oregon, and western Washington, wolf recovery is still precarious on the west coast,” said **John Mellgren, Western Environmental Law Center general counsel**. “A rush to delist the species across the entire country runs counter to the Service’s own peer review, and tells West Coast states that wolf recovery in their part of the country does not matter. We look forward to presenting the science to a federal court.”

While the Trump administration may believe it can disregard science to promote purely political listing decisions, the law does not support such a stance. The best available science says gray wolves are not recovered, and the coalition looks forward to having a court hear their science-based arguments for why wolves still need of Endangered Species Act protections to truly recover across the species range.

“In just the last year, we lost an icon to wolf recovery when OR-7 passed away. He and his mate represent the first generation of wolves in western Oregon in nearly a century,” said **Joseph Vaile with the conservation group Klamath Siskiyou Wildlands Center based in southwest Oregon**. “Delisting is clearly premature and obviously politically driven. It’s a last-ditch effort by the Trump administration to strip away protections for recovering wildlife.”

“Removing Endangered Species Act protections for any species should be based science, not politics, and the science tells us wolves are not there yet,” said **Chris Bachman, Wildlife Program director at The Lands Council**. “The gray wolf remains functionally extinct in 85% of its historic range, with 70% of suitable habitat remaining unoccupied across the lower 48 states. Legal protections must remain in place for the gray wolf to allow wider dispersal across a significant portion of its range.”

“Wolves were nearly exterminated from the lower 48. We should be celebrating the species’ ongoing recovery and the incredible success stories of the Endangered Species Act,” said **Nick Cady with Cascadia Wildlands**. “Instead, wolves have become another victim of the polarization and political game-playing in Washington D.C., and conservation groups are left battling to stem rising calls for active eradication of the species. Conservation of native species formerly enjoyed widespread bipartisan support. The actions of this administration toward wildlife are shameful.”

“The finger on the trigger of wolf slaughter is driven by anti-government fanatics who foment fear, lies and mistrust. The Endangered Species Act makes such hostility to wild nature more closely watched,” said **Timothy Coleman, director of Kettle Range Conservation Group and former member of the state Wolf Advisory Group**. “Eighty-five percent of known gray wolves killed in Washington lived in the Kettle River Range where it was delisted from the ESA in 2011, though remaining a state listed endangered species. Entire wolf families would not have been killed since 2011 in northeast Washington had the ESA safeguards been

applied. Regionally, the effect of this has been wolves are not dispersing to southwest Washington, Mount Rainier and Olympia National Park and thus the state is not meeting its own recovery goals.”

“California’s wolves are just starting to return home,” said **Tom Wheeler, executive director at the Environmental Protection Information Center**. “A politically driven delisting puts wolf recovery in jeopardy by stripping protections at the moment they are needed most.”

“We must learn to coexist with gray wolves. These highly intelligent and social animals play a key role in balancing entire ecosystems,” said **Kimberly Baker of the Klamath Forest Alliance**. “Federal protection is paramount to safeguarding this nation’s rightful heritage.”

The coalition of western wildlife advocates launching this legal challenge includes WildEarth Guardians, Western Watersheds Project, Cascadia Wildlands, Klamath-Siskiyou Wildlands Center, Environmental Protection Information Center (EPIC), The Lands Council, Wildlands Network, Klamath Forest Alliance, and Kettle Range Conservation Group, represented by the Western Environmental Law Center. A separate lawsuit is planned by Earthjustice representing national wildlife groups.

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