

Lawsuits over wolf hunting filed in Mont., Wyo.

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(AP) -- A pair of federal judges will decide which states in the Northern Rockies have enough gray wolves to allow public hunting, as the bitter debate over the region's wolves heads to courts in Wyoming and Montana.

Environmentalists filed a lawsuit in Missoula on Tuesday seeking to restore protections for more than 1,300 [wolves](#) in Montana and Idaho. The Obama administration in April upheld a Bush-era decision to take wolves off the endangered species list in those two states.

The lawsuit could block regulated wolf hunts slated to begin this fall and scuttle a plan to remove all the predators from part of north central Idaho.

[Gray wolves](#) remain on the [endangered species list](#) in Wyoming, but in another lawsuit, Wyoming attorney General Bruce Salzburg on Tuesday asked a federal judge in Cheyenne to clear the way for hunts in his state. Salzburg rejected claims by federal officials that local laws were too weak to protect Wyoming's 300 wolves.

Gray wolves were listed as endangered in 1974, after they had been wiped out across the lower 48 states in the early 20th century by hunting and government-sponsored poisoning. There are now an estimated 1,645 wolves in the Northern Rockies, not including this year's pups.

"There's absolutely no question this population is fully recovered. There's wolves moving all over the place," said Ed Bangs, wolf recovery coordinator for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Wolves were returned to Wyoming, Idaho and parts of Montana in the mid-1990s over strong objections from ranchers and many politicians.

In Wyoming, the complaints have grown as wolves take a bloody toll on livestock and big game herds. Federal wildlife agents regularly remove wolves preying on livestock in the state, but many say that has not been enough as livestock killings have continued to grow.

Wyoming law declares almost 90 percent of the state a "predator zone" where wolves can be shot on sight. For now, however, that law is superseded by federal protections.

"We have to attempt to protect our wildlife and our livestock in the face of really no help from the federal government," said Wyoming House Speaker Colin Simpson. "If the only way to do that is through litigation, then that's how we'll have to proceed."

Bangs said the agency had no choice but to reject Wyoming's wolf management plan. Last summer, U.S. District Judge Donald Molloy in Missoula pointed to the state's predator zone as a prime reason for throwing out an earlier federal proposal to take wolves off the endangered list.

"The Wyoming plan folded like a house of cards the first time anybody took a hard look at it," Bangs said.

For Montana and Idaho, federal officials say the threat of extinction has passed and the population is large enough to survive on its own. But the environmental groups and the Humane Society of the United States

argue that the wolves' biological success could quickly be reversed absent federal oversight.

"Idaho in particular has shown an eagerness to aggressively reduce its wolf population," said Jenny Harbine, an attorney with Earthjustice who helped write the environmentalists' lawsuit. "Until states commit to managing their wolf populations in a responsible and sustainable manner, federal protections remain crucial."

Ben Neary reported from Cheyenne, Wyo.

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