

Wolf hunts to open, judge eyes injunction request

August 31 2009, By MATTHEW BROWN , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- Gray wolf hunting was set to begin in the Northern Rockies, even as a federal judge eyed a request to stop the killing of the predators just four months after they were removed from the endangered species list.

U.S. District Judge Donald Molloy said Monday he would rule as quickly as he could on a last-minute injunction sought by environmental and animal welfare groups opposed to the hunts in Idaho and Montana.

Hunters were poised to head into the field Tuesday in Idaho, where a quota allowed as many as 220 [wolves](#) to be killed. Montana's season is set to begin Sept. 15, with a quota of 75 wolves.

Missoula hunter Mac McLaughlin attended Monday's court hearing then left to buy his hunting tag, saying he was tired of the wolves attacking elk. He intended to use an elk call to lure wolves.

"If the opportunity comes up, you bet I'll shoot one," he said. "There's got to be a balance and our game populations have taken a terrible beating."

More than 9,000 hunters in Idaho already have bought tags allowing them to kill a wolf. Tags went on sale Monday in Montana.

Wolves were removed from the endangered species list in Idaho and Montana in May, with management of the animals transferred to the

state wildlife agencies.

Doug Honnold of the environmental law firm Earthjustice said wolves remained at risk because the states had insufficient safeguards to ensure their safety.

"It's the endangered species that need to be protected, not the states' rights to kill wolves," Honnold said during the hearing.

Michael Eitel, representing the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, said the agency would keep monitoring the wolves and step in to return the species to the endangered list if warranted.

"The Northern Rocky Mountain wolves are doing very well," Eitel said. "Yes there might be wolves that are killed, but that will not affect the population in Idaho and Montana."

Wolves once roamed North America but by the 1930s had been largely exterminated outside Alaska and Canada. An estimated 1,650 of the animals now live in the Northern Rockies - the result of a contentious \$30 million reintroduction program that began in 1995.

Today, the debate centers on whether that population will remain viable if hunting is allowed. That population is now five times the original recovery goal set in the 1990s.

Wyoming was carved out of the territory where wolves were removed from the endangered list.

That prompted Honnold to claim the government had "flip-flopped" on a prior policy against making [endangered species](#) decisions based on political boundaries.

In court, Eitel acknowledged his agency changed its position on the issue but urged Judge Molloy to accept its latest interpretation of the law.

Molloy appeared doubtful. "How am I supposed to make judgment as to which of their positions to give deference to?" he asked.

Molloy gave no indication how he might rule on the injunction request. State wildlife officials said the hunts would proceed pending the ruling.

Last year, Molloy sided with environmentalists in a similar case.

As a result, the federal government kept about 300 wolves in Wyoming on the endangered list.

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