

Western lawmakers turn sights on endangered wolves

October 4 2010, By MATTHEW BROWN , Associated Press Writer



In this Feb. 16, 2006 photo provided by Yellowstone National Park, a gray wolf is seen on the run near Blacktail Pond in Yellowstone National Park in Park County, Wyo. Lawmakers are proposing a rewrite of the Endangered Species Act that would lift protections for wolves first enacted in 1974. Critics say the move would effectively gut one of the nation's premiere environmental laws and allow for the unchecked killing of wolves across the West. (AP Photo/Yellowstone National Park)

(AP) -- Two decades after the federal government spent a half-million dollars to study the reintroduction of gray wolves to the Northern Rockies, lawmakers say it's time for Congress to step in again - this time to clamp down on the endangered animals.

To do so they are proposing to bypass the [Endangered Species Act](#) and lift protections, first enacted in 1974, for today's booming wolf

population.

Critics say the move would undercut one of the nation's premiere environmental laws and allow for the unchecked killing of wolves across the West.

But bitterness against the iconic predator is flaring as livestock killings increase and some big game herds dwindle.

And with state efforts to knock back the predators' expansion stalled in court, senators from Montana, Wyoming, Idaho and Utah want to strip wolves of their endangered status by force.

"When they brought wolves to Idaho, the Legislature voted against it, the governor didn't want it and the Congressional delegation didn't want it," said Idaho Republican Sen. James Risch. "We didn't want them in the first place. But we are prepared to deal with them as we see fit."

Following the reintroduction study, 66 wolves were brought from Canada to Central Idaho and [Yellowstone National Park](#). The population hit the original recovery benchmark of 300 animals a decade ago, yet they remain officially endangered.

At least 1,700 wolves now roam parts of six states.

Yet wildlife advocates warn the attempt to strong-arm a public hunt through Congressional action would set a dangerous precedent for other endangered species - and unravel a wolf recovery program that has cost \$30 million to date.

"It's comparable to throwing an individual species off of Noah's ark," said Doug Honnold, a Montana attorney representing groups that won an Aug. 5 court ruling that returned wolves to the endangered list.

No state has proposed getting rid of wolves entirely, despite calls to do so by individual ranchers. Montana and Idaho have plans to reduce their populations by 15 percent and about 40 percent, respectively.

Those states and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service appealed the August ruling last week. A final ruling could take years.

There also are proposals to hold wolf hunts with the animals still listed as endangered. That idea has gotten a cool reception from federal wildlife officials.

State officials say intervention by Congress may be the only viable option remaining.

Environmentalists have vowed to lobby hard against several wolf bills introduced in the past two weeks. And the measures face another hurdle: Lawmakers are split along party lines over which states should be allowed to hunt wolves.

A measure introduced by Senators Max Baucus and Jon Tester, Montana Democrats, would leave wolves endangered in Wyoming, which has a shoot-on-sight law for wolves across most of the state.

That Wyoming law played a pivotal role in the August court ruling and another in 2008 that reversed a previous attempt to take wolves off the endangered list.

"If Wyoming doesn't want to put forward a management plan that works, that's Wyoming's fault," Baucus said. Tester said Wyoming "hasn't wanted to play" and suggested that Montana could not wait for its southern neighbor to change its mind given ongoing livestock losses from wolf attacks.

Republicans have sponsored more sweeping measures that would delist wolves across the lower 48 states, including Wyoming. Idaho's delegation has yet another bill, described as a fallback plan, that includes only that state and Montana.

Senators from both parties and across the region met last week in part to resolve the Wyoming issue. But a common front has yet to emerge.

Wolves were off the endangered list for over a year before the latest court ruling. In that time, hunters in Montana and Idaho killed 260 of the animals.

Environmentalists decried the shootings as unprecedented for a species just off the endangered list. Among the wolves killed were members of a well-known Yellowstone National Park pack that crossed onto Montana land.

Yet those managed hunts were a far cry from the days when bounty hunters known as "wolfers" poisoned, shot, trapped and burned the species to near-extinction early last century.

A count at the end of 2009 showed the region's wolf population rose slightly last year despite the hunts. Wildlife officials heralded the increase as proof the states could show restraint.

Even without public hunting, government wildlife agents regularly retaliate against wolves that attack livestock, typically by shooting them from aircraft.

About 270 were shot last year under the program and more than 1,300 have been killed since Congress' initial involvement.

"Government agents killing [wolves](#) with shotguns from helicopters -

that's not the model we had of conservation we had in mind," said Carolyn Sime, the head of Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks' wolf program.

"It took an act of Congress to direct the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to study reintroduction. Maybe that's fitting as a way to resolve this," she said.

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