

Protections rejected for wolf in decline

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For more than two decades, conservation groups have argued that a wolf and the rainforest in southeast Alaska where it lives are at risk.

While the groups have won strong restrictions on logging of the Tongass National Forest, the nation's largest, they have been denied in their efforts to win federal protection for the wolf.

This week, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service denied them again: The agency determined that the wolf, known as the Alexander Archipelago wolf, should not be listed as an endangered or threatened species.

While the government agreed with conservationists that the wolf is declining in parts of its range and that loss of its habitat from logging is playing a role in that decline, it said the overall population of the wolf appears to be healthy.

"Although the Alexander Archipelago wolf faces several stressors throughout its range related to wolf harvest, timber harvest, road development, and climate-related events in southeast Alaska and coastal British Columbia, the best available information indicates that populations of the wolf in most of its range are likely stable," the Fish and Wildlife Service announced Tuesday.

Named for a collection of remote islands, the wolf actually ranges across much of heavily forested mainland southeast Alaska and the coast of British Columbia in Canada. Conservationists pressing for its protection have focused on wolves in the archipelago, which includes on Prince of

Wales Island, an expanse of nearly 2,600 square miles with about 6,000 people.

Part of Prince of Wales is being logged under one of the largest timber sales in the Tongass in two decades, and estimates say the island could now have as few as 50 wolves, down from about 300 two decades ago. Logging can also reduce habitat for deer, a critical food source for the wolves.

Conservationists built part of their argument on scientific evidence showing that wolves on the islands - an area the government calls "GMU 2," for Game Management Unit 2 - are genetically distinct from those roaming the mainland. The government agreed there are differences but said they were not strong enough to warrant listing the island wolves as a distinct species.

The best available genetic data "do not indicate that the GMU 2 population harbors significant adaptive variation, which is supported further by the fact that the GMU 2 population is not persisting in an unusual or unique ecological setting," the government concluded.

Bruce Dale, the director of the division of wildlife within the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, which argued against a listing, said the state was committed to protecting the wolf through improved forest management and hunting practices and other means. Despite the declines, he said wolves and deer on the islands remain abundant relative to other parts of the range.

"That doesn't mean they weren't more abundant before," he said.

The decision was a victory for the region's remaining timber industry. Only one large sawmill remains on Prince of Wales Island.

The Fish and Wildlife Service said it expects wolves on the island to decline further in the next 30 years from "the cumulative effect of stressors."

"However, [wolves](#) here constitute only 4 percent of the range of the Alexander Archipelago [wolf](#) and 6 percent of its current estimated total population. Therefore, negative population impacts on these islands will likely not affect the rangewide population in a significant way," the agency said.

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