

Trump administration drops gray wolf from endangered species list

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Heralded as one of the greatest success stories of the Endangered Species Act, the gray wolf will lose federal protections under a Trump administration decision announced Thursday.

The decision from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the second time in the last decade that federal wildlife officials have tried to remove gray wolves from the [endangered species list](#), where they say the animals no longer belong now that they're thriving in the wild.

Like the previous attempt, which took place under the Obama administration, this latest effort is expected to face legal challenges. Conservationists maintain that wolves have only returned to certain parts of their former habitat and say that the agency is acting prematurely.

"We absolutely plan to challenge it" said Jamie Rappaport Clark, chief executive of the conservation advocacy group Defenders of Wildlife and a former director of the Fish and Wildlife Service under President Bill Clinton. "We believe they've declared victory too soon."

Hunted and harassed, poisoned and trapped, gray wolves were near extinction in the continental United States by the time they were added to the endangered list in 1974. At the time, about 1,000 wolves remained. They now number more than 6,000.

"After more than 45 years as a listed species, the gray wolf has exceeded all conservation goals for recovery," Interior Secretary David Bernhardt said in a statement.

Many biologists, however, though thrilled by the population growth, say the species hasn't fully recovered throughout its historic habitat. Before humans began a campaign to eradicate them, gray wolves roamed throughout most of the U.S.

Today, they are primarily found in Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan, as well as the Northern Rockies where they have been successfully reintroduced.

But outside of these clusters, wolves haven't established viable populations, said Joanna Lambert, a professor of animal ecology at the University of Colorado, Boulder. Although parts of Colorado, Utah and California could be ideal wolf habitat, there are hardly any packs in these states. It's unclear whether gray wolves will be able to expand their range without the [federal protections](#) they've had for nearly 50 years.

If the courts uphold the Trump administration's decision, then gray wolves will be subject to individual states' rules on hunting and trapping, as well as private land owners who run the gamut from tolerant to hostile.

In California and Washington state, wolves would still be protected under those states' endangered species laws. But Utah allows wildlife managers to trap and euthanize wolves to prevent them from reestablishing themselves. And in Montana and Idaho, where Congress intervened to strip wolves of federal protections, nearly 500 have been killed in the past year, according to Lambert.

"I really do worry about what's going to happen in some of these states," she said. "There's going to have to be a lot of eyes on the ground overseeing those populations."

Soon after wolves were reintroduced to the Northern Rockies in the mid-1990s, efforts began to remove their protected status. The return of the country's most controversial predator drove a wedge between ranchers, who saw them as a threat to livestock, and environmental groups. Hunters complained about having to compete with wolves for deer and elk. In parts of the West where belief in small government is sacrosanct, the wolf became a symbol of burdensome regulation.

Many of the attempts to weaken protections were overturned by federal judges. Though wolves have been delisted in Montana, Wyoming, Idaho,

eastern Oregon and eastern Washington, the Obama administration's efforts to end protection for the species in the Great Lakes region was undone by a court order in 2014.

Kaitlynn Glover, executive director of the Public Lands Council, a trade organization representing ranchers, said this time is different.

"The science is more up to date. The species is in very good shape. The populations are robust," she said. "Certainly the Endangered Species Act has a role in protecting those species that are imperiled, but once a species demonstrates they have recovered, that federal attention should be refocused."

However, there are indications that the Trump administration's decision may be vulnerable to legal challenge. In a peer review of the agency's proposal, experts on the [gray wolf](#) criticized the scientific analysis underpinning the decision to delist the species, writing that the agency's conclusions were based on factual omissions and errors. One expert noted that the proposal barely considered the effects of climate change, which federal wildlife officials claimed would not affect wolves.

Whatever the outcome of the fight over federal protections, conservationists are taking steps to shore up support for wolves at the state level.

In Colorado, environmental and animal protection groups are leading a campaign to pass Proposition 114, a ballot measure that would require state biologists to reintroduce gray wolves in the state's western public lands by 2023. The proposal is unprecedented—no other state has taken the lead in reintroducing a federally endangered, native species to its home territory.

The campaign has drawn opposition from ranchers, farmers and hunters,

who see the dispute as an attempt by city-dwelling Coloradans to push their beliefs about animal rights onto rural communities that will have to coexist with wolves. Although the measure would require the state to compensate ranchers for livestock killed by [wolves](#), opponents have argued that bringing back a native predator would lead to severe financial losses.

Wolves have been largely absent from Colorado since the 1940s and the state wildlife commission has resisted efforts to reintroduce them. A few adventurous animals have made their way into the state from time to time—a pack was reported to be living in the northwestern part of the state earlier this year—but groups that favor reintroduction say it's unlikely they'll reestablish themselves naturally.

"The deal with [gray wolves](#) is if they're not shot or poisoned or run over, they're a robust [species](#). If given half a chance, they do well," Lambert said. "But they need that chance."

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