

Gray wolf population in peril unless Biden restores 'endangered species' protections

November 25 2020, by Collette Adkins



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After decades of bitter legal feuds and culture war skirmishes over the fate of wild wolves in the United States, the Trump administration has tried to put a point at the end of the sentence. In stripping gray wolves of

their Endangered Species Act protection across the country, the responsible federal agency went against both science and public opinion, and declared the species "biologically recovered."

But this delisting rule won't stand up to scrutiny. More [wolves](#) will die as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service squares off, once again, in court against conservationists with strong arguments that there's no evidence on which to base the agency's claim that wolves will be just fine.

The latest delisting of the gray wolf is the most egregious yet, both legally and scientifically. A peer-review panel found it riddled with errors and lacking the evidence to properly support delisting, but the agency ignored those concerns.

This issue presents President-elect Joe Biden an opportunity to break from the mold cast by his predecessors. Prior to this latest effort by the Trump administration, President Barack Obama allowed a previous delisting effort to move forward.

In his first weeks as president, Biden should take decisive action and direct federal wildlife agencies to embrace a science-backed, full recovery of the wolf in the lower 48 states—which would hinge on restoring federal protections under the Endangered Species Act and keeping them in place.

If Biden chooses instead to allow delisting to stand, well, we've seen that movie before.

In 2012, wolves were removed from the federal endangered species list in Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota. A federal judge restored protection in 2014, and an appeals court upheld this ruling in 2017.

In the two-and-a-half years that wolf hunting and trapping were allowed,

more than a third of the region's entire wolf population was killed. A repeat of the same fiasco would result in the same leap backward for wolf recovery on a nationwide scale.

There's little to support claims of wolf recovery. Oregon has some 160 wolves inhabiting just 12% of the suitable habitat within the state. Washington's 2019 minimum population was reported at just 108 wolves—the third straight year the growth rate for the state's wolf population was well below the baseline recovery rate of 30%.

If allowed to proceed unchecked, federal delisting will trigger a cascade of state management decisions that will bring more state-sanctioned wolf slaughters and doom the species' recovery.

States such as Wisconsin mandate an immediate wolf hunting and trapping season upon federal delisting. Wolves that attempt to disperse from the western Great Lakes states to seek new territory in the Dakotas can be gunned down on sight without penalty.

In California, wolves are barely starting to return, with only 14 confirmed animals in the state. California's wolf recovery depends on wolves migrating in from Oregon. But once [federal protections](#) are removed there, California's source population will be at risk.

The fundamental purpose of the Endangered Species Act is to protect and recover imperiled species and the ecosystems upon which they depend. Most of us are now familiar with the many ecological benefits wolves provide, as illustrated by wolf reintroduction to Yellowstone National Park. Yet with delisting, we'll never know how healthy [wolf](#) populations might transform their former habitats in the Adirondacks, Sierra Nevada or Black Hills of South Dakota.

Nearly every time the Fish and Wildlife Service has attempted to strip

wolves of protection, these efforts have either been overturned in court or withdrawn. Again and again, the courts have told the agency that its attempts to remove protections from wolves were flat-out illegal.

It's time for the Fish and Wildlife Service to unchain this magnificent, ecologically essential [species](#) from its absurd legal and political carousel. Delisting was a last-minute "gift" from the Trump administration to conservative voters and the livestock industry right before the November election. If Biden allows it to stand, it would send a signal that he doesn't have the stomach for charting the course needed in the U.S. to undo the incredible damage done to environmental policy over the past four years.

The uncertainty surrounding the status of wolves erodes faith in good governance and wildlife management—and even the value that people place on wolves. Protection under the federal Endangered Species Act remains the most powerful and effective means of undoing nearly a century of eradication efforts throughout the nation. Without it, wolves will remain as they are now—pale shadows of their former selves, diminished symbols of a wild America now lost.

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