

Biden backs end to wolf protections but hunting worries grow

August 20 2021, by Matthew Brown and John Flesher



This July 16, 2004, file photo, shows a gray wolf at the Wildlife Science Center in Forest Lake, Minn. President Joe Biden's administration is sticking by the decision under former President Donald Trump to lift protections for gray wolves across most of the U.S. Credit: AP Photo/Dawn Villella, File

President Joe Biden's administration is sticking by the decision under

former President Donald Trump to lift protections for gray wolves across most of the U.S. But a top federal wildlife official on Friday told The Associated Press there is growing concern over aggressive wolf hunting seasons adopted for the predators in the western Great Lakes and northern Rocky Mountains.

Wolves under federal protection made a remarkable rebound in parts of the U.S. over the past several decades, after being driven from the landscape by excessive hunting and trapping in the early 1900s.

States took over wolf management last decade in the Northern Rockies and in January for the remainder of the Lower 48 states, including the Great Lakes and Pacific Northwest.

The removal of Endangered Species Act protections had been in the works for years and was the right thing to do when finalized in Trump's last days, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Assistant Director for Ecological Services Gary Frazer told AP.

On Friday, attorneys for the administration asked a federal judge in California to reject a lawsuit from wildlife advocates that seeks to restore protections, signaling the conclusion of Biden's promise on his first day in office to review the Trump move.

But wolf management policies in place at the state level have shifted dramatically since protections were lifted, and Frazer suggested the federal government could take steps to restore protections if population declines put wolves back on the path to extinction.

"Certainly some of the things we're seeing are concerning," he said.

Wisconsin moved quickly to reduce the state's wolf numbers, after a pro-hunting group with close ties to conservative Republicans won a court

order that allowed hunters—some using hounds—to kill 218 wolves in four days.



In this Feb. 2021, file photo released by California Department of Fish and Wildlife, shows a gray wolf (OR-93), seen near Yosemite, Calif., shared by the state's Department of Fish and Wildlife. A top federal wildlife official on Friday, Aug. 20, 2021, said there is growing concern over aggressive hunting rules adopted by states in the Great Lakes and northern Rocky Mountains. Credit: California Department of Fish and Wildlife via AP, File

Meanwhile, Republican-dominated legislatures in Idaho and Montana loosened hunting rules to allow tactics shunned by many wildlife managers, including hunting wolves at night and from the air and

payments for dead wolves reminiscent of bounties that drove them to near-extinction.

Frazer said the different states showed a common approach: legislatures and politically appointed wildlife commissions taking determined steps to reduce populations.

"We're aware that circumstances have changed and we'll be watching closely to see how the population responds," he added.

The lead attorney in the lawsuit to restore protections for wolves outside of the Northern Rockies said he was disappointed in the Biden administration for not responding immediately to the push by states to cull more packs.

"Why should we hammer the population back down and lose all the gains that have been made before any kind of remedial action?" asked Tim Preso with the environmental law firm Earthjustice. "The writing's on the wall. Montana and Idaho are clear on what they're intending and Wisconsin is right behind them."

Montana wildlife commissioners on Friday adopted hunting rule changes in accordance with new state laws that allow the use of snares to kill wolves, night hunting and use of bait—methods criticized as unethical by some hunters and former officials. The new rules went further than recommended by state wildlife experts, who for example wanted to limit snare use to private land only.

Montana Fish and Wildlife Commission Vice Chair Patrick Tabor, a hunting outfitter from the Whitefish area, said in voting in favor of the changes that he was proud of his hunting ethics. Tabor said the loosened rules "allow more opportunity for hunters, to give them in essence better odds in trying to be successful because they (wolves) are an incredibly

difficult animal to hunt."

Defenders of the move to lift federal protections noted efforts to put wolves under state management enjoyed bipartisan support in Washington going back to President Barack Obama.



In this Dec. 4, 2014, file photo, released by the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, a wolf from the Snake River Pack passes by a remote camera in eastern Wallowa County, Ore. President Joe Biden's administration is sticking by the decision under former President Donald Trump to lift protections for gray wolves across most of the U.S. Credit: Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife via AP, File

Yet the policies adopted by the states reflect an increasingly partisan approach to predator management in legislatures dominated by Republicans.

The wolf population in the Midwest has grown to more than 4,400 wolves, according to government figures disputed by some scientists who say officials undercount wolves killed by poachers.

There's been growing frustration in recent years among livestock producers and hunters over attacks on cattle and big game. In Wisconsin, a Republican-controlled board set the state's fall hunt quota at 300 animals, rejecting a 130-animal limit recommended by state wildlife managers.

Wisconsin's Democratic attorney general is seeking a court order to oust the board's chairman, whose term expired in May. Democratic Gov. Tony Evers has appointed a successor, but the incumbent is refusing to step down until the Senate confirms the appointment. The Senate, dominated by Republicans, hasn't held a hearing on the appointment.

Hundreds of wolves are now killed annually by hunters and trappers in Montana, Idaho and Wyoming. The Northern Rockies' population has remained strong—more than 3,000 animals, according to wildlife officials—because wolves breed so successfully and can roam huge areas of wild land in the sparsely populated region.

Some state officials are intent on reducing those numbers to curb livestock attacks and protect the big game herds that wolves prey upon. Supporters of restoring protections warn that will tip the scales and reduce wolf numbers to unsustainable levels, while also threatening packs in nearby states that have interconnected populations.

An indication of how deeply federal officials are worried about the

states' wolf policies is expected in the next several weeks, when they respond to petitions filed in June to again put wolves in the U.S. West under federal protections.

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