

# Canada lynx protections deal sealed by US, environmentalists

April 26 2022, by Matthew Brown

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A Canada lynx is released in Schoolcraft County in Michigan's Upper Peninsula on April 12, 2019. U.S. wildlife officials have agreed to craft a new habitat protection plan for the rare, snow-loving Canada lynx that could include more land in Colorado and other western states. Credit: John Pepin/Michigan Department of Natural Resources via AP, File

U.S. wildlife officials have agreed to craft a new habitat plan for the snow-loving Canada lynx that could include more land in Colorado and other western states where the rare animals would be protected, according to a legal agreement made public Tuesday.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service faces a 2024 deadline to draft the new plan for the wild cats after settling a legal challenge from two environmental groups—Wild Earth Guardians and Wilderness Workshop. U.S. District Judge Dana Christensen issued an order late Monday approving the settlement.

The groups sued to enforce a prior court ruling from Christensen that said federal officials wrongly excluded areas of Colorado, Montana and Idaho when they designated almost 40,000 square miles (104,000 square kilometers) in 2014 as critical for the lynx's long-term survival.

On land designated as critical, federal agencies are required to consult with wildlife officials before taking or allowing any activities that could destroy or alter the habitats of a protected species. Those consultations can potentially lead to restrictions of logging in federal forests or limitations on dirt roads used for recreation.

Christensen cited the presence of a reproducing lynx population in the southern Rocky Mountains of Colorado.

Agency officials had earlier concluded that Colorado and adjacent areas of Wyoming and New Mexico were "not essential" for the recovery of the species, pointing in part to low population densities of snowshoe hares that lynx eat.

To comply with the judge's order, the Fish and Wildlife Service will evaluate which parts of the Southern Rockies and elsewhere are critical for lynx and propose them for potential protections by Nov. 21, 2024,

according to a statement provided by agency spokesperson Joe Szuszwalak.

Lynx are elusive, forest-dwelling animals. There is no reliable population estimate, but several hundred are believed to roam parts of the U.S. Rocky Mountains.

The animals also are found in Minnesota, Maine, Washington state and occasionally Michigan.

They were reintroduced to Colorado beginning in the late 1990s and listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act across the contiguous U.S. in 2000.

During Donald Trump's presidency, officials said the lynx had recovered and no longer needed protection after their numbers rebounded in some areas. President Joe Biden's administration [reversed course](#) in November and agreed to keep the lynx's threatened species protections. That did not resolve the dispute over what areas they would need to survive.

"There's a lot of really good habitat in Colorado—wilderness and really remote areas," said attorney John Mellgren, who represented the environmental groups that reached the settlement.

But he added that those areas face increased pressure as trees in forested areas are killed by beetles, wildfires and other problems that are being worsened by climate change.

Some scientists warn climate change could undo progress in lynx recovery, by melting away their snowy habitat and decreasing the availability of snowshoe hares.

U.S. government biologists in 2016 predicted some lynx populations

would disappear by 2100. That was based on models predicting widespread and substantial habitat losses because of climate change.

Under Trump, officials shortened their time span for considering climate change threats, from 2100 to 2050, because of what they said were uncertainties in long-term climate models. A government assessment based on that shortened time span concluded lynx populations had increased versus historical levels in parts of Colorado and Maine.

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This version corrects the first name of the judge who presided over Canada lynx lawsuits to Dana, not Donald.

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