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Contacts:

Timothy Coleman, Kettle Range Conservation Group, 509-775-2667 tcoleman@kettlerange.org
John Mellgren, Western Environmental Law Center, 541-359-0990, mellgren@westernlaw.org
Kelly Nokes, Western Environmental Law Center, 575-613-8051, nokes@westernlaw.org

Wolves: Groups will challenge Trump admin removal of endangered species protections in lower 48

Today, the Trump administration [will announce](#) its decision to prematurely remove endangered species protections for wolves in the lower 48 states, in violation of the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The most recent data from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and its state partners show an estimated 4,400 wolves inhabit the western Great Lakes states, but only 108 wolves in Washington state, 158 in Oregon, and a scant 15 in California. These numbers lay the groundwork for a legal challenge planned by a coalition of Western conservation groups.

“It is illegitimate for the Trump Administration to remove protection for a small population of state-listed endangered wolves in Washington state,” said Timothy Coleman, director, Kettle Range Conservation Group. “Outside of the Northeast Washington, just a couple of wolf packs exist and there’s just one pack in all of western Washington, including high quality habitat in Olympic and North Cascades National Parks. Northeast wolf packs are a key source population essential to reestablishment of genetically diverse wolf packs across the state and Pacific Northwest.”

In delisting wolves, the Service ignores the science showing they are not recovered in the West. The Service concluded that because in its belief there are sufficient wolves in the Great Lakes states, it does not matter that wolves in the West are not yet recovered. The ESA demands more, including restoring the species in the ample suitable habitats afforded by the wild public lands throughout the West. Indeed, wolves are listed as endangered under state laws in Washington and California, and wolves only occupy a small portion of available, suitable habitat in Oregon. Likewise, wolves also remain absent across vast swaths of their historical, wild, public lands habitat in the West, including in Colorado and the southern Rockies.

“Given that gray wolves in the lower 48 states occupy a fraction of their historical and currently available habitat, the Fish and Wildlife Service determining they are successfully recovered does not pass the straight-face test,” said John Mellgren, an attorney with the Western Environmental Law Center. “On its face, this appears to be politically motivated. While the Trump administration may believe it can disregard science, the law does not support such a stance. We look forward to having a court hear our science-based arguments for why wolves desperately need Endangered Species Act protections to fully recover.”

The conservation groups have long been active on wolf recovery issues in the American West, including working with western states to develop science-based wolf management plans, mounting cases to rein in rogue federal government wolf-killing programs, promoting recovery efforts in the Southwest for critically imperiled Mexican gray wolves, and furthering non-lethal methods to prevent wolf-livestock conflicts before they occur.

“Wolves are a keystone species whose presence on landscapes regulates animal populations and improves ecosystem health – something the Service has acknowledged for at least 44 years,” said Kelly Nokes, an attorney at the Western Environmental Law Center. “Allowing people to kill wolves in Idaho, Wyoming, and Montana has already stunted recovery in those states. Applying this same death sentence to wolves throughout the contiguous U.S., would nationalize these negative effects, with potentially catastrophic ripple effects on ecosystems wherever wolves are found today.”

The best available science says gray wolves are not recovered. Should the Trump administration decline to correct its legal violations by rescinding the delisting decision, conservation groups from across the country and Western Environmental Law Center and its partners will challenge the premature removal of endangered species protections for gray wolves in federal court at the first opportunity, 60 days after the rule is published in the Federal Register.

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