

Delisting of Wolves Raises Hackles Brad Knickerbocker, The Christian Science Monitor May 28, 2008

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By Brad Knickerbocker | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor/ May 28, 2008 edition

Ever since humankind first huddled around a fire, the eerie howl and piercing amber eyes of wolves have been both fascinating and fearsome.

Today, some of those primal emotions are at play as ranchers and politicians, bureaucrats and environmental activists work out the future of *Canis lupus* in the northern Rocky Mountains.

Like many contested issues involving wildlife, this one is in federal court. Federal agencies, affected state governments, and ranching and hunting interests say there are so many gray wolves in the Rockies now that it's time to remove them from the list of endangered species.

Wolf advocates say it's too soon to do that, and later this week a federal judge in Missoula, Mont., will decide how the case should proceed.

Once totaling more than 350,000 in the US West, wolves “were hunted and killed with more passion and zeal than any other animal in US history,” according to the US Fish and Wildlife Service.

As their numbers dwindled toward extinction in the contiguous 48 states, the gray wolf became protected under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) in 1974.

As part of the federal recovery plan required under the ESA, 66 Canadian wolves were set loose in Yellowstone National Park and part of Idaho in 1995-96. They formed up into breeding pairs and packs, their numbers growing at more than 20 percent a year. Today, more than 1,500 wolves range around Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming. Some crossed the Snake River into Oregon.

As a result, the government in March “delisted” northern Rocky Mountain wolves, turning over wolf management to the three states. “The wolf population ... has far exceeded its recovery goal and continues to expand its size and range,” said Deputy Secretary of the Interior Lynn Scarlett, announcing the move.

Scientists are learning that wolves can have a beneficial impact on ecosystems. But since the delisting in March, there's been an upswing in wolf killing (at least 69), including the illegal shooting of a wolf in a protected area last week.

“There's much greater public appreciation of the role of top carnivores,” says Louisa Willcox, senior wildlife advocate with the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) in Livingston, Mont. “On the other hand, the myth of Little Red Riding Hood just won't die.”

“It's amazing the pockets of fear and irrationality that still pervade the wolf debate,” she says. “Plus, the whole symbolic weight that wolves carry because they came in with the federal government – and not just that, but the Clinton administration.”

In many parts of the rural West, the federal government controls much of the landscape (64 percent of Idaho), and Uncle Sam is seen as big brother imposing an environmentalist view.

“It should be the people in Idaho deciding whether we have wolves or not,” says Rex Rammell, a veterinarian, former elk rancher, and independent candidate for the US Senate seat being vacated by Larry Craig (R).

A native Idahoan and lifelong hunter who lives in Rexburg, Idaho, Dr. Rammell contradicts official reports in asserting that elk and moose herds in many places have dropped substantially due to wolves. He also takes a strict state-rights position: “All of these western states should have the land turned over to them.”

Under state plans, some 500 wolves could be legally killed to reduce the population to around 1,000 in the region. But conservationists fear those plans in fact could reduce the total number to 300: That is, 100 in each of the three states (the minimum required under the federal recovery plan). And some politicians are eager to do just that.

"I'm prepared to bid for that first ticket to shoot a wolf myself," said Idaho Gov. Butch Otter (R). On the day of the delisting, Governor Otter signed a new law allowing people to kill wolves without a permit whenever the animals are thought to be annoying, disturbing, or "worrying" livestock or other domestic animals.

Following delisting, Wyoming implemented a "kill on sight" predator law covering nearly 90 percent of the state outside of Yellowstone.

Antiwolf feeling is a matter of degree. Only the most radical wolf opponents want to eradicate them, and many ranchers have found ways to live with them. A proposed ballot measure to get rid of all wolves in Idaho failed to get enough signatures recently. Still, 35,000 people did sign the petition.

Tony Mayer, head of Save Our Elk in Twin Falls, Idaho, says wolves should be managed to the level envisioned in the ESA listing – 100 to 150 in Idaho instead of the 750 officially there now. But he adds that that could not be accomplished by sport hunting alone, and he worries that "pro-wolfers have hijacked the ESA."

"We think wolves have a place in the wilderness," he says, citing evidence that there actually are 1,000 wolves in Idaho now with annual population growth rates of 30 percent. "But we can't sit by and see the wolf population explode to the detriment of other wildlife," he concludes.

A dozen environmental groups recently sued to reverse the federal delisting on the grounds that the Fish and Wildlife Service's approval of state management schemes "permits a level of wolf killing that radically diminishes the prospects for a functional northern Rockies metapopulation." (A group of separated wolf packs that may interact is a metapopulation.)

The court is expected to rule May 29 on a preliminary injunction halting the de-listing. The US Fish and Wildlife Service sought to delay the case. But in an order last week, US District Judge Donald Molloy in Missoula wrote: "The court is unwilling to risk more [wolf] deaths by delaying its decision on plaintiff's motion for preliminary injunction."

Scientists say reintroducing wolves has led to ecosystem benefits. Thinning of overpopulated elk in the Yellowstone area, for example, has helped rejuvenate overbrowsed plant species.

Writing in the journal *Biological Conservation*, researchers William Ripple and Robert Beschta at Oregon State University in Corvallis say they've documented "the first significant growth of aspen in over half a century" in Yellowstone. "Wolves appear to represent a key component in helping to passively restore these complex and wild ecosystems," they write.

This has made rivers and streams healthier, leading to better habitats for beaver, songbirds, and native trout. Wolves also have reduced the coyote population and improved the health of elk and deer herds by removing diseased animals.

Recent advances in population genetics have led other scientists to conclude that the reduced numbers outlined in state plans for wolf management could lead to inbreeding and genetic deterioration. Biology professor Robert Wayne at the University of California, Los Angeles, has concluded that 300 wolves in the region "severely underestimates" the number required for a healthy wolf metapopulation, as he stated in a letter to the US Fish and Wildlife Service. More than 250 other scientists signed a similar letter to the agency, and several studies conclude that 2,000 wolves are needed to maintain the species.

But opposition to increasing (or even maintaining) wolf numbers is fierce.

Livestock have been killed by wolves, and hunters fear that the wolves' return threatens game animals as well.

But state game agencies report that elk populations are at or above population management objectives. Hunters in Wyoming killed 22,635 elk last year, 1,542 more than the year before.

Many times more cattle and sheep are killed by coyotes, vultures, or domestic dogs (or stolen by rustlers) than are lost to wolves, says the National Agricultural Statistics Service. Between 1987 and 2005, 528 cattle and 1,318 sheep were confirmed lost to wolves, and 396 wolves were legally shot by ranchers or killed by government control efforts, according to the US Fish and Wildlife Service.

Since 1987, the environmental group Defenders of Wildlife has maintained a trust fund to compensate farmers and ranchers for loss of livestock to wolves. So far, 738 payments (some involving more than one stock animal) have been made totaling just over \$1 million.