

Wolves Might be Relisted Under the Endangered Species Act

By Ava Kowalski. (*Updated*) Oct. 13, 2021.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service [announced](#) last month that it will undertake a formal review of the protection status of gray wolves in the Northern Rocky Mountains and some Western states in response to two separate petitions filed by environmental organizations.

The Center for Biological Diversity and three other environmental organizations filed the first [petition](#) in May calling for the Service to relist wolves in the Northern Rocky Mountains as endangered or threatened under the Endangered Species Act. The organizations filed the petition after Idaho and Montana passed legislation that authorizes hunters, trappers, and private contractors to kill up to 90% of the states' wolves.

Wolves in the Northern Rockies were removed from the Endangered Species Act in [2012](#), stripping them of federal protection and instead leaving protection up to individual states. Relisting wolves as endangered would make it illegal for anyone to capture or harm wolves in any way.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has found that, based on the petitions, wolves in the Western U.S. may warrant relisting as endangered. The Service now has up to 12 months to conduct the status review based on the best available science and information. If the Service finds that wolves do warrant relisting, a separate rulemaking process with public notice and comment will take place.

“We’re encouraged by the fact that the Fish and Wildlife Service has recognized that these new laws in Idaho and Montana could pose a serious threat to wolf populations in the West,” says Andrea Zaccardi, senior attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity. “So we’ll be engaging in the process of submitting our information to the Fish Wildlife Service.”

Although Zaccardi says she is encouraged by the status review, she raised the concern of timing. “Our fear is that the population can be substantially lowered by these laws right now,” says Zaccardi. “We were happy that the Fish and Wildlife Service took the petition seriously and is initiating a status review, but it’ll be a year from filing our petition before we get an answer from the Fish and Wildlife Service as to whether they think relisting is warranted.”

Amaroq Weiss, senior wolf advocate at the Center for Biological Diversity, says that wolf hunting, trapping, and snaring will continue until the Service takes action to relist wolves.

“The wolf wars are ongoing and will probably go on for the rest of my life and yours,” says Weiss. “Because there’s a segment of society that does not appreciate wolves, and that segment of society has very powerful political influence. And that political influence seems to outweigh the science of what we know of how important wolves are.”

Weiss is referring to an intense divide between ranchers, hunters, and state politicians who oppose wolf protection, and scientists and environmentalists who advocate for greater wolf protection.

There is no clear record of how much livestock wolves kill, though, or evidence that killing wolves actually reduces livestock losses.

Weiss also points out that wolves help sport hunters rather than compete with them. She says that wolves help curb Chronic Wasting Disease, which is contagious and fatal to elk and deer in the Northern Rockies.

“If you love elk and deer, and you're a hunter, you really ought to love wolves because they help keep those elk and deer healthy,” says Weiss. “And if you're worried about chronic wasting disease in elk and deer, then you definitely should want wolves back on the ground because they're going to cull the sick animals and make it less likely that C.W.D. will spread.”

Weiss says that wolves can even help fishermen by keeping elk and deer on the move, which prevents overgrazing of riverside vegetation and thus soil erosion. Together, these processes help keep the water cool, which is important to maintaining healthy fish habitats. “Wolves are important to the whole fabric of the ecosystem,” says Weiss.

Greg Lemon, a spokesperson at Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks says that the wolf population in Montana has been relatively stable, thanks to the state allowing public wolf hunting.

“Population management is not done by the agency. We don't go out and kill animals to get within popular objectives. We license and permit those opportunities for hunters,” says Lemon. “I think that's part of why our wolf numbers have been the stable ones, because there's a harvest opportunity through hunting and trapping every season.”

Whatever the agency’s approach to wolf management may be, Lemon says that it’s happy to provide the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service with the information it needs in doing the status review. “We’ve managed wolves in Montana and we’re confident that we can continue to do so and keep them well above the thresholds outlined in our conservation strategies,” says Lemon.

George Edwards, Executive Director of the Montana Livestock Loss Board, says that relisting Northern Rocky Mountain wolves would place financial hardship upon ranchers, who are already running on very thin margins to stay in business.

The Montana Livestock Loss Board runs off of limited funding from the state to compensate ranchers who file claims for livestock killed by wolves, says Edwards.

“When wolves were listed, we saw a steady increase in our death loss claims until the point that they were delisted in our state, at which point they stabilized,” says Edwards. “So if wolves are relisted, that's going to put us in quite a bind.”

Idaho property owner Scott Findlay, who ran cattle and horses on his land until last year, says that wolves are causing a huge problem for ranchers and professional hunters. “If somebody came in and tried to hurt the way you make a living, you probably wouldn't like it either,” says Findlay in reference to advocates of wolf protection. “Just stay in your own lane. It's going to change our lives, but it's not going to change their lives.”

Weiss from the Center for Biological Diversity says that the status review acts as a small step in giving wolves the adequate protection and safety that they need. “Because the livestock industry still has a stranglehold on our political processes, I think we will always see battles continue to play out,” says Weiss. “But every time we win, it is another reprieve for wolves.”