



The Oregonian

Some gray wolves lose U.S. protection

Wildlife - Animals remain safe under Oregon law, but groups fear reduced Idaho numbers will hurt those here

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U.S. wildlife officials said Thursday that they will drop federal protection for gray wolves across much of the inland West, but the move has little immediate effect on wolves in Oregon because they remain under state safeguards.

The move signals the success of one of the most controversial wildlife recovery efforts in the West. However, conservation groups fear that it also opens the door for nearby Idaho to dramatically reduce its wolf population through hunting, leaving fewer to find their way to Oregon and rebuild the species here.

Although wolves have not yet fully reclaimed all of their historical range in the West, federal biologists said Thursday that the species has recovered in the three Rocky Mountain states -- Idaho, Montana and Wyoming -- where wolves were reintroduced in the 1990s.

That meets the federal criteria for removing wolves from the federal endangered species list in much of the inland West and handing management over to the states, which may then allow limited hunting of the species. The delisting becomes effective in late March, but wildlife groups say they will fight it in court.

More than 1,500 wolves in more than 100 breeding pairs roam Idaho, Montana and Wyoming. The minimum federal standard for recovery is 300 wolves in 30 breeding pairs in the three states.

In Oregon, the delisting applies only in the eastern third of the state -- mainly east of U.S. 395 north of Burns and east of Oregon 78 and U.S. 95 south of Burns. Any wolves in the western two-thirds of Oregon remain under federal endangered species protection.

Biologists believe at least a few wolves from Idaho are roaming northeastern Oregon -- where the species will lose federal protection -- but have found no sign of a breeding population in the state. Wolves anywhere in Oregon remain protected by the state's own Endangered Species Act, said Russ Morgan of the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife.

The state act generally provides even tougher protection than the federal act. It requires ranchers to obtain a permit before killing wolves that go after their livestock.

Oregon's wolf plan calls for four breeding pairs of wolves each in eastern Oregon and western Oregon, as divided by U.S. 97 north of Bend and U.S. 20 and 395 south of Bend.

But conservation groups are concerned that the federal move to downgrade protection for wolves in Idaho will make it tougher for wolves to recover in Oregon because there will be fewer in Idaho to move west.

"The way we're going to get healthy populations here is if we have healthy populations in Idaho," said Greg Dyson, executive director of the Hells Canyon Preservation Council, based in La Grande.

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