

Members of Congress Want to Remove the Gray Wolf From the Endangered Species Act

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January 14, 2015 | 11:35 pm

Gray wolves have a storied past in the United States, once numbering in the millions. Hunting and the destruction of their wilderness habitats pushed them to near-extinction. Federal protections in the 1970s brought them them back from the brink.

In the last two years, a combination of legislative and legal actions have heightened debate over the extent to which gray wolves should receive federal endangered species protections. In December, a federal judge overturned a US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) decision to remove gray wolves in the western Great Lakes Region from the Endangered Species Act.

Now, in response, a Wisconsin Congressman is sponsoring legislation to return management of gray wolves back to the state regulators in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan, and Wyoming. The bill, which has been drafted but has yet to be introduced, would delist the approximately 4,000 wolves in the region and allow them to be hunted.

"Wisconsin's wolf population has significantly recovered over the last several decades, and I am confident in our state's ability to manage the population," Wisconsin Representative Reed Ribble, a Republican, told VICE News. "I am pursuing a bipartisan legislative fix that will allow the Great Lakes states to continue the effective work they are doing in managing wolf populations without tying the hands of the Fish and Wildlife Service or undermining the Endangered Species Act."

Nash Greenwald, director of Center for Biological Diversity's endangered

species program, sees the effort as a threat not only to the wolves. "It's just no way to implement the Endangered Species Act and it's no way to treat wolves," she told VICE News. "It's something we're deeply concerned about."

Representative Collin Peterson, a Democrat from Minnesota, Republican Representative Dan Benishek of Michigan, and Republican Representative Cynthia Lummis of Wyoming are co-sponsors of Ribble's legislation.

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The FWS's delisting of gray wolves took effect in 2012. The move permitted states to issue kill permits to landowners experiencing conflicts with wolves, to kill wolves in order to manage populations, and to implement a wolf-hunting season. It also made it legal for individuals to shoot wolves attacking pets or livestock and to use dogs to hunt wolves. The federal court's decision in December made these activities illegal once again.

Much of the tension between conservationists and those that support delisting is due to the fact that gray wolves are treated as distinct populations in different areas of the United States. Environmentalists argue that although wolves have recovered in some states, the North American population as a whole is nowhere near its historic range and thus merits continued federal protection.

"It's been horrific," Greenwald told VICE News. "We spent millions of public dollars to recover wolves and then we let the states take over, even though they were very hostile to wolves."

The delisting has allowed for statewide wolf hunts to begin. According to the organization Wisconsin Wolf Hunt, 272 wolves were killed in Minnesota and 154 wolves in Wisconsin during hunts last year. Michigan has held one hunt, in 2013, in which 22 wolves were killed.

In Montana, where wolves were delisted in 2011, individuals can obtain a permit to kill up to five wolves. But those rules aren't always enforced, says Rod Coronado, an environmental activist who founded Wolf Patrol, an organization that follows hunters to track wolf kills.

[Animal rights activists target Wisconsin's annual grey wolf hunt. Read more here.](#)

"Those kinds of attitudes are what we're trying to highlight and these contest killings do a good job of it," Coronado told VICE News. "They reveal the general attitude that still exists that sees wolves as a threat on the landscape."

Ranchers in Montana and other states with resurgent wolf populations say wolves often kill their livestock, cutting into often slim profit margins.

"It's a huge issue, it definitely can't be ignored," Coronado told VICE News. "But there are plenty of avenues available. There's a greater need for more nonlethal controls, the things that used to work before to keep predators out of ranchers' fields."

Coronado points to tactics like range riding — old-fashioned cowboys on horses keeping an eye on the property — and orange flags on the perimeter as effective ways to keep wolves and other predators away from livestock.

"What it comes down to is we've learned a lot about living with wolves," Greenwald told VICE News. "There are a lot of things that ranchers can do to greatly reduce the risk that they'll lose livestock to wolves or other predators."

A report from the USDA's National Agriculture Statistics Service, which uses self-reported data from cattle producers, found that wolves were responsible for the death of 8,100 head of cattle in 2010, or about 0.2 percent of all reported cattle deaths. Dogs killed 21,800 cattle that year.