

Wyoming sues over wolf delisting

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CHEYENNE, Wyo.

The state of Wyoming on Tuesday sued the federal government over its recent decision to leave gray wolves in the state on the endangered species list while delisting them elsewhere in the Northern Rockies.

The state's lawsuit, filed in U.S. District Court in Cheyenne, marks only the latest chapter in a long-running battle between state and federal officials over how to manage wolves since the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service reintroduced the animals in Yellowstone in the mid-1990s.

Many ranchers and sportsmen in Wyoming complain that the wolf population is taking an unacceptable toll on livestock and other wildlife.

Rep. Colin Simpson, R-Cody and speaker of the Wyoming House of Representatives, said Wyoming has no choice but to sue over wolf management.

"We have to attempt to protect our wildlife and our livestock in the face of really no help from the federal government," Simpson said. "If the only way to do that is through litigation, then that's how we'll have to proceed."

In response to a lawsuit from environmental groups, a federal judge in Montana last year rejected Wyoming's wolf management plan that called for classifying wolves as predators that could be shot on sight in most of the state. Following that decision, the Fish and Wildlife Service withdrew its earlier approval of Wyoming's wolf management plan.

The Fish and Wildlife Service in April announced it was removing gray wolves from the endangered list in Montana and Idaho while maintaining federal protections in Wyoming.

The Natural Resources Defense Council and other environmental groups announced Tuesday that they were filing a separate federal lawsuit in Missoula, Mont. The groups are challenging the Fish and Wildlife Service's decision to delist wolves in Montana and Idaho, saying they're opposed to plans in those states to allow wolf hunting and have other concerns about wolf management.

Ed Bangs, wolf recovery coordinator for the Fish and Wildlife Service in Helena, Mont., said Tuesday that the agency estimated the wolf population in the Northern Rockies at 1,645 animals last December, of which just over 300 were in Wyoming. He said perhaps as many as 1,000 pups were born this spring.

"Right now, just a rough guess, there's probably a couple of thousand wolves in the

Northern Rockies," Bangs said. "The science in this thing — there's absolutely no question this population is fully recovered. There's wolves moving all over the place."

While many in Wyoming are critical of the Fish and Wildlife Service's decision to repudiate the state's proposed management plan after first accepting it, Bangs said the agency ultimately had no choice.

"You need to have a plan that you can implement, and that will stand up," Bangs said. "The Wyoming plan folded like a house of cards the first time anybody took a hard look at it."

Wyoming's new lawsuit seeks a court order to force the federal government to turn wolf management over to the state. The state says the federal agency arbitrarily changed its position when it decided to reject the state's management plan to classify wolves as predators in most areas.

If the courts won't turn wolf management over to Wyoming, the lawsuit asks for a court order directing the Fish and Wildlife Service to manage wolves so that the population doesn't exceed 15 breeding pairs.

"We've been in constant litigation since 1994," Bangs said, adding that he expects litigation will continue both from people in favor and opposed to seeing more wolves.

"In the old days, when somebody didn't like it, they punched you in the nose, or hung you," Bangs said. "And these days they drag you into court. I don't know which is crueler."

Wyoming Attorney General Bruce Salzburg said the state maintains the federal government had no scientific reason to reject the state's management plan.

In addition, Salzburg said Wyoming maintains that the federal government wants to force the state to support more than its fair share of the wolf population.

Salzburg said the federal government has said the Northern Rockies wolf population needs to be at least 30 breeding pairs and 300 wolves for the species to be classified as recovered. He said the federal government wants to require Wyoming to manage for 15 breeding pairs and 150 wolves plus an additional seven breeding pairs outside the national parks in the state's northwest corner.

"The requirement that Wyoming have an additional seven breeding pair outside the parks causes Wyoming's total share of the population to be inequitable," Salzburg said.

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Don't be so wussy, Wyoming. Wolves improve wildlife- and livestock- as they cull the old, weak and sick. Leave the beer at home, get your fat butts out of those stupid tree stands and start hunting your deer like in the old days. Don't be girly men killing off the wolf competition.

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