

Rift exposed among Oregon leaders on wolf protections

By Andrew Selsky
Associated Press

SALEM (AP) — Slapping down a stance taken by the director of Oregon’s wildlife department, Gov. Kate Brown declared Wednesday, May 15, that the state and its agencies oppose the federal government’s proposal to take the gray wolf off the endangered species list.

Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife Director Curtis Melcher had written on May 9 to a federal agency in support of the proposal, saying that in the Lower 48 states and Mexico, the gray wolf no longer meets the definition of an endangered or threatened species under the federal Endangered Species Act.

Conservation groups and an Oregon congressman blasted Melcher’s position after the letter, which had not been publicly announced, came to light this week. Then Brown herself weighed in on Wednesday in a letter to U.S. Interior Secretary David Bernhardt, saying she wanted to “clarify and correct” Melcher.

“The state of Oregon and its agencies do not support the delisting of wolves from the federal Endangered Species Act across their range in the 48 contiguous states,” Brown wrote. She said she notified the wildlife department that the conclusion that Oregon or its agencies support delisting the wolf “is incorrect.”

The wolf issue exposed conflicting views on how much protection is needed for wolves, which are starting to make a comeback. It also showed an apparent lack of coordination among top state officials on the issue. The director of the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, or ODFW, is appointed by the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission, whose seven members are appointed by the governor.

Rep. Earl Blumenauer, an Oregon Democrat, said Wednesday he was “shocked and appalled” at Melcher’s letter to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, saying the state official abdicated his mission to protect fish and wildlife.

“I am ashamed by your willingness to throw an incredibly important predator species under the bus in favor of a few private interests that clearly have a different mission than your agency,” Blumenauer told Melcher in a letter.

Oregon wildlife department spokeswoman Michelle Dennehy said in an email that Melcher’s bullet points in his letter speak for themselves on wolf recovery in Oregon and

why the department is supporting the federal delisting in the Lower 48, except for the Mexican wolf subspecies.

In his letter to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Melcher noted an increase in Oregon’s wolf population. ODFW reported in April there were 137 known wolves in Oregon at the end of 2018, a 10% increase over 2017.

Melcher also said in his letter that Oregon is committed to gray wolf conservation, ensuring the species’ progress while minimizing livestock losses.

Noah Greenwald, endangered species program director at the Center for Biological Diversity, said lifting federal protections now would hamper further wolf recovery in Oregon and expose the animals to killing by the state.

The state of Washington’s

wildlife agency also recently said wolves should be removed from the federal endangered species list throughout Washington state.

Washington Fish and Wildlife Director Kelly Susewind said his department “is confident that Washington’s wolf population is on a path leading to successful recovery.” Susewind

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— Gov. Kate Brown



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wrote that protecting thriving wolves could expose the Endangered Species Act to legislation weakening protections for species in actual danger of extinction.

The federal government has already delisted wolves in the eastern one-third of Washington and Oregon, as well as in Idaho, Montana and Wyoming and contends that gray wolves no longer qualify for federal protection as an endangered or threatened species.

The Interior Department’s proposed delisting would cap a decades-long restoration effort that saw a turnaround for wolves, which were nearly exterminated across the Lower 48 states. Now more than 6,000 gray wolves

live in portions of nine states.

Oregon officials have drafted a state wolf plan, which lists its goal as ensuring “the conservation of gray wolves as required by Oregon law while protecting the social and economic interests of all Oregonians.” The new plan will update the first one, adopted in 2005 when there were no wolves in Oregon.

In 2015, Oregon removed wolves from its state endangered species list. But a prime objective of the draft plan is to continue to promote a naturally reproducing wolf population in Oregon, connected to a larger population of wolves and allowing for expansion into other areas of the state.

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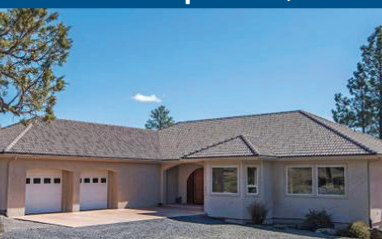
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