

A Fight for Survival

STATES TURN BACK THE CLOCK ON WOLF PROTECTIONS

After several years and over 3,000 miles of searching, last week it was confirmed that our famed OR-7 is no longer a lone gray wolf. Not only has OR-7 found a mate, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) announced he has fathered at least two pups — the first wolf pups in southern Oregon in decades. Many wolf advocates and OR-7 fans missed the irony in the agency's announcement.

For over a year, the USFWS has been threatening to strip away the very same federal protections that gave OR-7 a fighting chance to start his own pack. The USFWS has signaled its intent to disregard science and take the gray wolf off the endangered species list. If delisted, states could declare open season on wolves like OR-7, his mate and the new pups.

The USFWS has actively tried to delist gray wolves for over a decade. Unfortunately, Congress has tried to help them along the way.

Three years ago, swayed by powerful interests and a number of conservative Western states, Congress foolishly voted to end ESA protections in Idaho, Montana, Washington, Utah and parts of Oregon. In 2012 the USFWS followed that action up by removing protections for wolves in Wyoming. The USFWS billed this as an effort to return management of the wolf to the states — but it has actually become a fight for gray wolf survival.

Idaho immediately turned back the clock, resurrecting the same extermination programs that landed the gray wolf

on the endangered species list in the first place. Recently, Idaho established a wolf extermination board that is aiming to reduce the population of this “recovered” species by 85 percent, to just 150 wolves, under the guise of “wildlife management.” They are even sending hunters into federally designated wilderness areas to target wolves — in violation of a federal wilderness plan. Because the federal government delisted the wolf in Idaho, it has no legal authority to intervene and stop the killing.

The USFWS has turned a blind eye and ignored what is happening on the ground in states like Idaho to fulfill its delisting mission. Last year, it announced a plan to remove protections for all gray wolves in the lower 48 states. It presented a “scientific” study to justify delisting the wolf — a study written by four scientists on the USFWS payroll. The USFWS resurrected an internal agency journal that had been dormant since 1991 to publish the study, avoiding the rigorous scrutiny demanded in major scientific and academic publications.

Last year, I led the charge in Congress and pushed the USFWS to take a harder look at the science. In January, the USFWS begrudgingly released a long overdue peer review from a panel of independent, objective experts in the fields of ecology, taxonomy and genetics. The reviewers unanimously agreed that the USFWS did not use the “best available science” and that they actively ignored data that conflicted with their own conclusions.

This report just confirmed what many of us already knew.

For the USFWS, the survival of gray wolves isn't about science, or their stated goal of species recovery. To them, this is about politics. They've been driven by the influence of Tea Party-led red states and powerful wolf-phobic special interests that want to drive wolves into extinction.

But we can stop this.

Later this year, the USFWS will make a final decision to delist the wolf or continue protections. I plan to do everything I can to ensure the USFWS cannot ignore the chorus of voices and howls opposing its rule. We need to make sure they cannot ignore the many experts that are skeptical of the so-called science behind the decision. We must prevent them from handing the responsibility of gray wolf survival to cash-strapped states that are either too ill-equipped to manage or too indifferent to care.

What is the point of decades of work and millions of taxpayer dollars to save a species that was nearly lost, only to allow it to be hunted into near-extinction once again?

If the USFWS moves forward with the proposed delisting, OR-7, his mate and their pups would be under grave threat. And what could be one of the greatest wildlife recovery stories of the Endangered Species Act will remain unfinished.

Tweet your support for continued federal protections using the hashtag #standforwolves. Write a letter to the USFWS asking them to rescind their rule. Join the 160,000 Americans who have signed my CREDO petition to continue these critical protections for gray wolves [bit.ly/1hg0tNm]. Share information about the proposed delisting on your Facebook page.

We cannot allow the USFWS to declare open season on Oregon's newest wolf pack. Together, we can save OR-7, his mate, their pups and America's most iconic Western animal from extinction once again.

Peter DeFazio represents Oregon's Fourth District in Congress.

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