

PULLING OUT ALL STOPS

On August 5 in Missoula, U.S. District Court Judge Donald Molloy put wolves in Montana and Idaho back on the endangered species list. Despite a strong legal defense by the two states and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS), the judge ruled that the federal delisting of wolves in 2009 violated the Endangered Species Act (ESA) because wolves were not also delisted in Wyoming.

This was bad news for Montana wildlife management. We had planned to reduce the state's wolf population to roughly 450 animals this year with a combination of management tools, including public fair chase hunting. Judge Molloy's ruling ends for now this agency's ability to use hunting to manage wolves.

Let me be clear: Wolves are an important, native component of Montana's natural world. FWP wants to see a recovered and viable wolf population and won't do anything that would endanger the population's long-term health. But wolves in Montana are fully recovered, and there's no biological reason they should not be delisted and managed by the state as resident wildlife, the same as elk or black bears. Just as there can be too many deer, geese, or mountain lions, there can be too many wolves. An unchecked wolf population will kill too many livestock and substantially reduce deer, elk, and moose populations. And if the large carnivores continue to reduce their wild prey base, their own population will eventually crash.

Just as important, a wolf population out of balance with other wildlife reduces tolerance and support among ranchers, hunters, and others for the large carnivores to remain in Montana.

We can't effectively manage wolves if public hunting isn't an option. That's why FWP has been working since the day of Judge Molloy's ruling to find ways to regain state authority or otherwise allow for a regulated public hunt with strictly enforced harvest quotas, similar to the successful hunt held in 2009. What we have done so far:

- FWP quickly appealed the District Court's decision to the Ninth Circuit Court; strongly urged the USFWS to do the same; and met with the plaintiffs to look for ways to reach a negotiated compromise (which would then be presented to the public before any final agreement).

- FWP has strongly urged the USFWS to grant Montana a wolf season under provisions of the ESA that allow for a "conservation" hunting season; asked to hold hunts, again under ESA provisions, in areas where wolves are harming elk and deer populations; and asked the USFWS to reclassify northern Montana's endangered population to threatened status, as in the state's southern half, to make it easier to respond to livestock depredation problems.

- FWP is working with Montana's congressional delegation to look for federal legislation options that could return wolf management to Montana.

- Montana state officials have met with their Wyoming counterparts to see if that state might revise its wolf management plan to be acceptable to the USFWS, which could then delist wolves in all three states. (The federal agency has rejected Wyoming's current plan,

which is why Judge Molloy returned wolves to the endangered species list.)

- FWP has met with conservation, stockgrower, and other groups to discuss options and update them about department efforts.

Unfortunately, we are not optimistic that federal authorities will be convinced to allow Montana to hold a wolf hunting season

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in 2010. But we will keep trying. Montana's history is filled with successful wildlife restorations and management, from elk and pronghorn to grizzlies and cougars. Our approach to wolves has been equally notable. To maintain that track record, Montana needs to maintain full management authority over all of its healthy wildlife populations, including wolves. The delay caused by the District Court's ruling sets back conservation of this important native carnivore.

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—JOE MAURIER, *Director, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks*



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