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Critical Protections Restored for Gray Wolf

Federal judge says state management plans inadequate

July 21, 2008 – Late last week, Judge Donald Molloy of the U.S. District Court in Missoula, Montana reinstated federal protections for the Northern Rockies gray wolf. Despite the fact that scientists say wolf populations are not yet healthy, the gray wolf was removed from the endangered species list on March 28, 2008, placing them in the care of the states of Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming. Regulations in these states do not provide adequate protection for wolves. As a result, approximately 90 wolves have been killed since they were removed from the list.

The injunction granted by Judge Molloy will help keep wolf numbers from declining while a case challenging removal of the wolf from the endangered species lists works its way through the courts.

“We are very pleased with Judge Molloy’s ruling,” Melanie Stein, a Sierra Club representative, said. “This is one step in a long process towards improving wolf management. The ruling puts an immediate stop to the wolf-killing that has taken place in the Northern Rockies since delisting. The states lack responsible, science-based management plans that ensure the wolf’s recovery into the future and the judge’s ruling reflects this.”

The federal government’s decision to remove the wolf from the endangered species list was premature and inappropriate, largely due to inadequate state management plans that allow for indiscriminate killing of wolves. In Wyoming, the state management plan included a shoot-on-sight zone where wolves could be killed in up to 87% of the state.

These plans could threaten the long-term survival of the gray wolf in the Northern Rockies, especially given the genetic isolation of wolves throughout the recovery area. In his decision memo, Judge Molloy noted: “The Fish and Wildlife Service nevertheless delisted the wolf without any evidence of genetic exchange between wolves in the Greater Yellowstone core recovery area and the other two core recovery areas.”

Aggressive wolf-killing practices, coupled with genetic isolation and plans to institute hunts in Idaho, Montana and Wyoming, could have pushed wolf numbers dangerously low and reversed decades of recovery work.

“We applaud Judge Molloy’s decision as we need to craft responsible management plans that will allow wolves to prosper and will benefit ranchers, hunters, the public and our local economies,” Stein said. “The decision is one step forward in an effort to go back to the drawing board and create rational, balanced management plans.”