

# Wildlife experts find fault in federal plan to delist wolves

By **John Myers** on Jun 4, 2019 at 5:38 p.m.

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Gray wolf. Getty Images

Five independent wildlife experts asked to review the federal plan to remove protections for gray wolves across the U.S. say the plan is fundamentally flawed and riddled with errors.

The five scientists, in a 245-page report submitted in May, provided separate opinions that the plan by the Trump administration's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to take wolves off the endangered species list isn't supported by the science — including whether wolves are genetically the same across the continent.

The five reviewers were actually barred from speaking to each other while submitting their opinions “but there was a common thread across all five” in the final report, Adrian Treves, an environmental studies professor at the University of Wisconsin and one of the five reviewers, told the News Tribune. “Each one found shortcomings in different parts of the proposal.”

“In my opinion, it doesn't look good for the Fish and Wildlife Service,” Treves said.

In the report, Treves said that it looks like the federal agency “decided to delist and then they compiled all the evidence that they thought supported that decision. It simply doesn't support the decision.” He said the agency failed to account for illegal wolf killing if the animal loses federal status.

“My primary concern was their handling of human-caused mortality, which is the major cause of wolf mortality, with my biggest concern being the illegal killing of wolves,” Treves told the News Tribune Tuesday.

Daniel MacNulty, an associate professor at Utah State University and one of the five reviewers, said in the report that the proposed rule had “demonstrable errors of fact, interpretation, and logic” and its description of where wolves presently range is fuzzy. MacNulty declined to elaborate on the report until it is formally released by the Fish and Wildlife Service.

The agency has not yet commented on the reviewer’s report. It’s unclear what impact the report will have on the federal proposal, a final version of which was expected later this year. But it’s likely wolf supporters will use the opinions to challenge the plan should it move forward.

The wolf plan, formally proposed in March, would have the most impact in Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan where established populations of wolves currently exist but where a court order has retained Endangered Species Act

Protections for them. But the plan also would “delist” wolves across all the contiguous U.S., even where they do not exist. (Acts of Congress already removed federal protections for Rocky Mountain and other western wolves.)

Public comments on the plan will be accepted until July 15. Information on the plan, called a federal rule, along with instructions on how to comment, can be found at [fws.gov/home/wolfrecovery](https://fws.gov/home/wolfrecovery).

Livestock farmers and some hunting groups want to end federal protections for wolves, saying the animals have become too numerous and their numbers need to be culled to reduce wolf-human conflicts.

Wolf supporters say that, while the animals are indeed thriving in the upper Great Lakes region, state agencies moved too fast to kill too many wolves once federal protections were withdrawn in 2012. Critics also note that wolves have not recovered across a broad portion of their original range, in more states, as the federal Endangered Species Act appears to call for.

The Fish & Wildlife Service, part of the U.S. Interior Department, has tried multiple times — through the Clinton, Bush and Obama and now Trump administrations — to delist wolves in Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan, saying the big predators have fully recovered here after brushing with extinction in the 1960s and 1970s. "The gray wolf no longer meets the definition of a threatened or endangered species. Today the wolf is thriving on its vast range and it is reasonable to conclude it will continue to do so in the future," said David Bernhardt, acting U.S. Secretary of the Interior, in announcing the plan in March.

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources estimates about 2,850 wolves in the state. The Wisconsin DNR estimates just under 1,000 with more than 500 estimated in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Wolves in all three states remain off-limits to public hunting or trapping until the federal status is changed.

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