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Montana aims to settle lawsuit or remove, kill gray wolves

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Montana aims to settle lawsuit or remove, kill gray wolves

By MIKE DENNISON Missoulian State Bureau missoulian.com | Posted: Friday, August 13, 2010 6:30 am | (39) Comments

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HELENA - Montana's top wildlife official said Thursday if the state can't settle a lawsuit that has derailed this year's fall wolf hunt, it will press for authority to kill certain wolves to control their population.

"The wolf is recovered; more than 500 wolves live in Montana," said Joe Maurier, director of Montana's Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks. "There is a place in Montana for them, but wolves have to be managed, just like other wildlife. Right now we can't do that."D

Last week, U.S. District Judge Donald Molloy of Missoula ruled that because Wyoming is still without a wolf management plan, federal wildlife officials broke the law by taking wolves off the federal endangered species list in Montana and Idaho.

Montana and Idaho have wolf management plans and both states sanctioned wolf hunts last fall.

But Molloy's ruling places wolves back on the endangered species list, blocking any hunting of the animals.

Maurier and other state wildlife officials said Montana wants to reduce its wolf population to about 450 animals, and is talking with federal officials, looking for the best and legal way to do it.

"We're just trying to figure out what's the best course to take," said agency spokesman Ron Aasheim. "The playing field changes almost daily. ... We've got to find some way to manage wolves, period."

Montana may appeal Molloy's ruling to the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, Maurier said, but the state also wants to continue to try to settle the case with the 13 conservation groups that filed suit, including Defenders of Wildlife, the Sierra Club, Natural Resources Defense Council and Alliance for the Wild Rockies.

If the state can't manage wolf packs in the state, wolves will continue to grow and affect ranchers and Montana's wildlife herds, he added.

"It's disappointing, when FWP and the people of Montana have worked so hard and done everything we were asked to do, to see a legal technicality upend the intent of the Endangered Species Act, which is to recover a species," Maurier said.

Options that the state is investigating include authority to remove wolves in some areas where they've affected other wildlife and taking "more aggressive" action in response to wolves killing livestock, such as killing entire wolf packs.

Montana and other states had suggested a "research hunt," but that option has been shot down by federal officials, Aasheim said. The research hunt would have been a study of how public hunting affects wolf

populations.

Under Molloy's ruling, livestock owners in southern Montana can still kill wolves if they spot wolves chasing or killing livestock. In northern Montana, however, wolves cannot be killed by livestock owners, unless in self-defense.

Maurier said the state also will seek to remove this "dual classification status," by asking federal officials to declare wolves in northern Montana to be "threatened" rather than endangered.

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