

The Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife and Fisheries  
Legislative Hearing on H.R. 764, H.R. 886, H.R. 1245, H.R. 1419  
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Members of the Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife, and Fisheries:

The gray wolf in the United States is recovered, no longer in danger of extinction, and should be removed from the Endangered Species Act of 1973 (ESA). H.R. 764 restores a rule that was developed by the Department of Interior with the extensive input of state jurisdictions. The final rule is entitled “Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants; Removing the Gray Wolf (*Canis lupus*) From the List of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife.” This rule was originally published on November 3, 2020 (85 Fed. Reg. 69778). In developing this rule, which H.R. 764 will reinstate, the Department of Interior undertook an exhaustive process to evaluate the best available science from multiple sources. Ultimately, the Department of Interior came to the appropriate conclusion that the wolf has recovered as defined by established recovery goals and no longer warranted listing under the ESA.

There is no doubt that the wolf is recovered in the United States. In the Great Lakes region alone, the wolf population was estimated at over 4,200 individuals. The established recovery plan for this region set clear numeric goals to serve as criteria for determining successful recovery. These goals have been exceeded every year since at least 1994. In addition to having met the threshold almost 3 decades ago, the regional population is now estimated to be least ten times the established delisting threshold. It is remarkable to note that, given the natural life span of wolves, every wolf on the landscape in the Great Lakes region was born long after recovery goals were met.

State wildlife agencies, as well as tribal agencies, monitor wolf populations. Monitoring any free ranging and wild population is challenging, but not insurmountable. Jurisdictions use a variety of techniques and methods to estimate the geographic range and population trajectory of wolves. These methods are well established and supported by peer-reviewed literature. It is impossible to know the absolute number of any species, including humans, but estimates yielded from scientifically-sound methods are reliable and allow for monitoring of the species. In addition, effective monitoring programs allow for evaluating population responses to management actions and changes. We can be confident that the wolf population is at least as large as estimates suggest because jurisdictions are using scientifically sound, defensible methods to produce these population estimates. Similarly, we can be confident that the potential impacts of management actions, or changes to management programs, can be evaluated and adapted as needed.

Wolves in the contiguous United States are represented by several meta-populations that collectively compose the overall population. Multiple established meta-populations help ensure that the overall population is robust and resilient. In the unlikely event that a meta-

population were to experience severe population declines, the impact on the overall population can be mitigated by the other subpopulations. Indeed, the Department of Interior appropriately recognized this resiliency in their final rule published in 2020.

The Department of Interior, with support from numerous states, has published several 'final rules' delisting the wolf during the last 15 years. Unfortunately, endless relentless litigation has vacated these rules. It is important to note that delisting wolves simply returns management authority and responsibility to the state and tribal jurisdictions in which wolves are found. Some jurisdictions may continue state or tribal level protections while others may allow some take. In each case, jurisdictions will weigh the various biological, economic, culture and social aspects unique to their respective jurisdictions to forge a path forward post-delisting. The agencies charged with managing wolves in these jurisdictions will be accountable to the public they serve. Similarly, elected bodies that wade into wolf management will also be accountable to their respective electorates. Additionally, this bill does not prevent the Department of Interior from relisting the wolf, via the data-driven rule making process, if the science supports such an action. Thus, there remains a checks and balances system between the federal government, state jurisdictions, and the affected public.

Failing to recognize that wolves are recovered and taking the appropriate action to reflect this reality via delisting undermines the intention of the ESA. The Act was intended to provide temporary protection and funding until a species met established recovery goals. Then, after these recovery goals are met, the states are to regain management authority following delisting. By not delisting wolves, even after they have far exceeded recovery goals, the integrity of the ESA is compromised. Additionally, funding, and other resources, are encumbered for wolves, a recovered species, that could otherwise be dedicated to species that are truly in need of assistance. Furthermore, the endless litigation cycle, that disregards scientifically-based recovery goals, disincentivize jurisdictions from pursuing endangered species recovery or embarking on partnerships to restore species that are actually imperiled. Jurisdictions will become hesitant, or outright resistant, to restore imperiled species if species are not delisted once recovery is met. Certainly, witnessing wolf populations that have surpassed recovery goals for over twenty years, yet remain listed, is discouraging at best. Finally, public support for imperiled species conservation degrades when citizens see abundant species classified as 'endangered' despite abundant data, and scientific consensus, that says otherwise. The public, especially the citizens that live in the core of wolf range, experience both the positive, and negative impacts of wolves. The public were told, via the recovery plan, the wolves would be delisted once they were recovered. Those citizens were further told the clear criteria used to determine if a species has been recovered. Yet, after meeting these criteria for almost thirty years, the public are still waiting to see wolves delisted. It is unfortunate that litigious entities continue to abuse the ESA and blatantly ignore science. As a result, we have a population that has been recovered for almost three decade and is at least an order of magnitude above established and agreed recovery goals yet is still listed. Sadly, the result is that science is devalued, partnerships are avoided, the public is disenchanting, and conservation suffers.

Gray wolves are recovered in the United States. The science is clear; this species is recovered, secure, and recovery goals have been met many times over. This is why the federal government, and so many states, have appropriately supported delisting again and again. Congress should likewise follow science, recognize the recovery of this iconic species, and delist wolves.

Respectfully submitted.

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